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My Lady Pride

CHARLES GARVICE

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MY LADY PRIDE

H. Gwendolyn Bridges

CHARLES GARVICE

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

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321 W. Baltimore St. Baltimore, Md.

MY LADY PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

A PLEA FOR JUSTICE.

It was a lovely evening in June, and the clock of Westbury church struck six as a young girl walked down the High Street toward the lanes leading to the open country beyond. She was tall and slim, as a young girl of nineteen should be; slim and exceedingly graceful, and the light, springy step spoke of health and strength, as well as youth.

She was beautiful, was this girl, as well as strong and healthy; and if I were to go over her good gifts in catalogue fashion, I should tell of her clear-cut, oval face, of the brown hair, almost black but for the golden tints reflecting the evening sun; of the large but expressive mouth; and, lastly, of the gray eyes that could be so soft or sparkling, demure or mirthful, just at the will and bidding of their owner.

But such enumerations are not of much use, because, elaborate as they may be, they never succeed in describing such beauty as Floris Carlisle's.

She had a tennis bat in her hand, and her face was slightly flushed, as if she had been playing up to the last moment, as indeed she had, for when the clock struck six she glanced up at the church turret and quickened her pace to a run.

Leaving the High Street, she turned to the left, and, pushing open a gate, sped up a small garden path and ran into a pretty cottage, which nestled back from the lane as if it were trying to hide itself.

I say "ran in," because the door was open, showing a quaint little hall, with an old oak chest for a table, and an old oak chair standing beside it. On both the chair and the chest were carved a coat of arms—a dove fighting with an

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eagle above an ivy bush. They were the arms of the Carlisles, and had been borne by one of Floris's ancestors as far back as the Crusades.

She threw the bat and her hat on the chest, and smoothing her hair with that gesture which only a woman can accomplish, opened a door on the left and looked in.

It was an extremely pretty and neat dining-room, and the cloth was laid for dinner, but Floris, after looking around and failing to see any one, went into the hall and called, in a clear, sweet voice:

"Mamma!"

At the same moment a neat and respectful looking little servant-maid appeared from the kitchen regions, and with a voice slightly hushed, said:

"Mistress is in the drawing-room, miss—with a gentleman."

The large gray eyes expressed a faint surprise, as if a visitor were an unusual thing, and she hesitated, with her fingers upon the handle of the drawing-room door. But, as a very thin voice from within said:

"Is that you, Floris? Come in!" She opened the door and entered.

Carlisle was seated in a chair beside the fire—there was a fire, though it was June, because Mrs. Carlisle was an invalid, and never quite warm from January to December—and opposite her sat a thin, middle-aged gentleman, with gray hair and small, sharp eyes.

At the entrance of the girl, the small eyes glanced at her with a sudden flash of admiration and surprise, then sought the fire again.

Mrs. Carlisle's face was very pale, and there was a troubled, anxious and extremely perplexed look in her face.

"This is my daughter, Mr. Morrel," she said, faintly; "Floris, this is Mr. Morrel, the lawyer."

Mr. Morrel rose and bowed sharply and quickly, as if he could scarcely spare time for the ceremony, and Floris inclined her head with a slight look of curiosity.

There was silence for a moment; then Mrs. Carlisle rose, and drew her silk shawl around her.

"You will stay and dine with us, Mr. Morrel?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

The lawyer glanced at his watch with a frown, as if he had a private quarrel with it, and looked up sharply.

"I have to catch the eight o'clock train, ma'am."

"You will have plenty of time," said Mrs. Carlisle; "I—I should be glad if you will stay, because you can explain this—this business to my daughter better than I can. Indeed, I fear I do not understand it," and she looked from one to the other with a perplexed and feeble glance.

Floris went toward her and arranged the shawl that had fallen askew, and the three went into the dining-room. It was the picture of comfort, and the hatchet-faced lawyer looked around and rubbed his hands, then frowned as if he had remembered something, coughed huskily, and sunk into his chair with a sigh.

Mrs. Carlisle sat at the bottom of the table, and Floris at the head, and it was to Floris that the soup was brought, as if she were the presiding genius.

"Have you come from London, Mr. Morrel?" she asked, in the clear, soft voice, which made one pause before answering, in case she should speak again.

"Yes," he said, sharply; "by the four-thirty! Very slow train! Shamefully late! But railway directors don't understand the value of time."

"And lawyers do!" said Floris, with a smile.

"They do," he assented, and then attacked the fish as if in illustration of the truth of his assertion.

Floris looked at him with a curiosity which would have been amused but for the pale, anxious face opposite her.

"Where have you been, Floris?" asked Mrs. Carlisle, to break the silence.

"To Lady Burton's tennis party, mamma."

"Oh, yes! I had forgotten," said Mrs. Carlisle, with a sigh.

"Do you play tennis, Mr. Morrel?" asked Floris.

"No, Miss Carlisle; I have no leisure for tennis. I hope you had a pleasant afternoon."

"Yes, very!" she said.

The conversation dropped again. It was evident that both the lawyer and Mrs. Carlisle were too full of some business matter to talk of anything else, and Floris relapsed into silent attention to their guest.

Presently the servant left the room, and Mrs. Carlisle, gently pushing the port decanter to the lawyer, said:

"Perhaps you will let us stay while you take your wine, Mr. Morrel, and—and tell my daughter about this business."

"Certainly, ma'am; but I don't drink port; it muddles the brains, and lawyers have to keep theirs clear."

Mrs. Carlisle sighed, and Floris rose and brought some claret from the sideboard.

The lawyer bowed, sipped the wine, and cleared his throat.

"I've come down to tell your mamma, Miss Carlisle, that the case has closed," he said, looking at her with a sharp interest in his small eyes.

"The case?" repeated Floris, knitting her brows; then she smiled. "I beg your pardon. I had almost forgotten," she explained. "I have known about it so long, ever since I can remember, that strange as it all seems, I have almost learned to forget it!"

"No doubt," he said, gravely. "The lawsuit was commenced during your grandfather's time."

"Yes," said Floris, smiling still; "I can remember, when I was a child, hearing another girl boast that she had a baronet in her family, and my retort that we had a chancery suit in ours."

The lawyer didn't look quite so amused as he might have done; perhaps he felt that there was some sarcasm on "the laws' delays."

"In your grandfather's time," he repeated. "He and Lord Norman were distantly connected—"

"We always denied the relationship," murmured Mrs Carlisle.

The lawyer bowed.

"At any rate, the two families, the Carlisles and the Normans, were mixed up, if I may use the expression, in some way or other."

"It was something to do with some land," murmured Mrs. Carlisle. "I don't understand it; I never did."

"And no one else, it would appear," said Floris, gently, but with a smile, "seeing that it has taken two generations to puzzle it out."

"And some of the most learned men on the bench, at the bar!" said Mr. Morrel. "At any rate, the two families quarreled about the land, and threw it into chancery. It is very easy—indeed, it is the easiest thing in the world to put a thing into chancery, and about the hardest thing to get it out again," and he then coughed behind his hand.

Floris leaned back in her chair, with her hands folded in her lap, and her beautiful gray eyes fixed on the window opposite her with dreamy intentness.

"The question at issue," resumed Mr. Morrel, "was very small to begin with, but its proportions grew as the case progressed."

"Yes," said Floris, softly, "and the costs, too, Mr. Morrel. We used to live at the Hall at one time."

The lawyer coughed again.

"Costs will grow, Miss Carlisle, in such a case as this. The suit's become one of the most celebrated on record. It will"—here he bowed impressively—"supply precedents for future cases unto the end of time."

"We ought to feel very proud," says Floris, with a low laugh.

"You ought," he assented, quite seriously. "It is quite an honor to be a party to the suit of Norman *versus* Carlisle!"

"It has been a very expensive honor," she said, smiling gently.

"Ahem! Yes, no doubt. But to come to the point. The case, I am proud and happy to say, was closed to-day. That is, I should be proud and happy," he corrected himself, with a slight flush, "if it had been closed with a different decision."

"Then we have lost?" said Floris, without any great show of interest.

He wagged his head gravely.

"I regret to say that you have, Miss Carlisle. After patient hearing in one court after another, the case has been carried to the Lords, and the final decision has been pronounced in favor of Lord Norman."

Mrs. Carlisle uttered a feeble moan, but Floris turned her lovely gray eyes on the thin face of the lawyer, without any suspicion of the significance of his words.

"Lord Norman," she repeated, softly, almost absently, thinking how, throughout her short life, that name had haunted and hovered about her. "Well, I suppose it is just."

"We always considered that his claim was most unjust," murmured Mrs. Carlisle. "I never understood it! Your poor father used to spend hours in trying to explain the case to me, but I always got confused and muddled."

"The effect upon a great many persons beside yourself, madame," said the lawyer.

Floris had risen, and stood at the window looking out at the view which, like a lovely panorama, stretched before her. There was not a hill or tree that she did not know and love. The lawyer's dry voice recalled her to herself.

"Yes, we, on our side, always thought the Norman claim unjust, of course, or we should not have continued fighting."

"But do you not think so now?" said Floris, turning to him.

"The highest court in the land has pronounced in his favor," replied the lawyer, significantly.

Floris sighed.

"Well," she said, gently, "I am sure that we are glad that it is all over, and that the case is decided. Lord Norman is quite welcome to the prize he has fought for—whatever it is—I don't know what it is!"

"A very large sum of money," said the lawyer, grimly, and Mrs. Carlisle moaned again.

"Which we might have won, and which would have made us rich again. Never mind, mamma," and as she spoke she turned, with a bright, consoling smile, upon the feeble lady shivering in her easy-chair. "Money isn't everything, as somebody says. Lord Norman is quite welcome to it, is he not?"

Mrs. Carlisle did not reply, and Mr. Morrel looked from one to the other rather curiously and in silence for a minute or so. Then he coughed, and with hesitation and embarrassment staring from every sharp feature, said:

"Ahem! If it were only the sum in dispute that was affected by the decision, Miss Carlisle, it would not so much matter."

"What else is there?" asked Floris, with quiet surprise.

"The costs," replied the lawyer, grimly; "the expenses of this trial and the one preceding it—"

"But we have been paying costs ever since I can remember!" she said. "It is the costs in this 'celebrated case,' of which we ought to be so proud, which has driven us from the Hall to this cottage; it is the costs and expenses which, like Aaron's serpent, Mr. Morrel, have swallowed up our carriages and horses and men-servants, and reduced us to the condition in which we are quite content," she added, with simple dignity that awed the dry and musty lawyer and made him cough again. "Surely, there are no further demands upon us!"

"I regret to say that there are," he replied, and to his credit, be it said, he looked sorry, as his glance rested upon the slim, graceful girl, with the clear, soft voice and large, gray eyes.

Mrs. Carlisle groaned.

"There are the costs of these last two trials, Miss Carlisle, and they amount to a little over five thousand pounds!"

The blow for which he had been mercifully preparing her was struck at last.

Floris stood quite still for a moment; then she went and laid her white hand tenderly and soothingly upon her mother's shoulder.

"Five thousand pounds!" she murmured, in a low, distinct voice, that quivered for all her effort to keep it firm. "We have to pay that?"

The lawyer inclined his head.

"Each side to pay its own costs," he said. "Yours will be quite that sum; but don't be alarmed, Miss Carlisle—"

She did not hear him. Her eyes were fixed on the floor, her heart beating slowly and heavily.

Five thousand pounds! She knew what it meant! Five thousand pounds! It would nearly ruin them! In a moment she saw the lovely view, lying bathed in the sunset, fading slowly away, giving place to some squalid London street; the comfortable apartment was transformed to a miserable parlor in a dirty lodging-house! This, then, was what this man had come to tell them! That they were ruined!

Her hand shook upon the feeble shoulder, and her parted lips quivered as the tears gathered slowly in her eyes.

Mr. Morrel had stopped abruptly as he saw that she was not listening; but now he went on again, his dry, sharp voice striking on her ears discordantly.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Carlisle; you have not heard me out yet. I have still some intelligence to communicate."

She turned her head toward him very slowly.

"I beg your pardon," she said, quietly; "I was startled."

"No doubt, no doubt," he sniffed. "Every excuse; my fault, Miss Carlisle. I ought to have told you first what I am going to tell you now."

She listened, with pale, sorrowful face.

"At the close of the trial, immediately after the decision of the judges, we received a communication from Lord Norman—through his lawyer, of course."

"Yes?"

"It was a communication which surprised us—surprised us very much. We had no right or reason to expect an offer of such a kind from Lord Norman, and it does him the greatest credit—the very greatest!"

"An offer from Lord Norman?" she repeated, dully.

"Yes!" snapped Mr. Morrel. "Immediately upon hearing that he had won his cause, his lordship sent and offered to pay your costs for you."

There was a silence while one could count twenty. The lovely face turned to the window was white and set. The hand resting on the feeble woman's shoulder shut tightly. The soft, firm lips closed with a close compression. Mr. Morrel was too much taken up with his own satisfaction to notice the effect of his announcement.

"It was a remarkably generous offer; extraordinarily so!" he said, wagging his head. "I was never more surprised in my life—never! Such a new experience for me, I assure you! I have often known of offers of compromise before cases have been finally tried, but never after. Why, it is a clear gift of five thousand pounds! I congratulate you and your mamma, Miss Carlisle," and he made a little bow, which broke off short as Floris's voice rose clear and full, though low, with the single word:

"Stop!"

Mr. Morrel looked up at her with a start. He had expected, if not a gush of gratitude, at any rate an expression of thankfulness and relief; but the "Stop!" sounded anything but that.

"You say that Lord Norman has offered, of his own free will, to pay these costs; to give us, you said, this money?"

"Yes, oh, yes; there is no mistake!" replied Mr. Morrel, "and we should have accepted, but thought it better, as a matter of form, to lay the offer before you. We thought that, perhaps, you would like to make something more than a formal acknowledgment of his lordship's kindness."

"Yes, yes," murmured Mrs. Carlisle, tremulously.

"Hush, hush!" breathed Floris, bending over her; then she raised her head and fixed her eyes upon the man of law.

"You did right, sir," she said; and at the solemnity in her voice he started and stared at her. "We should like to make something more than a formal acknowledgment, through a lawyer, of Lord Norman's—kindness!"

With a swift, yet graceful, and all too haughty, gesture, she glided to a side-table, and bending, not sitting, wrote hastily. Then she glided back, and with the air of an indignant empress, she extended her white hand with the paper in it.

"There's an acknowledgment of his lordship's offer. Be good enough to read it, Mr. Morrel."

The lawyer held the paper near the lamp, and, in his amazement, read the written words aloud.

"A Carlisle demands justice, not charity, and having received the former, has no desire to become the recipient of the latter, even though it should be at the hands of the Earl of Norman."

CHAPTER II.

LADY PENDLETON'S COMPANION.

Mrs. Carlisle uttered an exclamation of dismay, and began to wring her hands.

The lawyer stared and blinked with his small eyes at the tall, slim figure and proud, beautiful face, as if he were on the verge of a fit.

"Good gracious!" he gasped, at last. "Do you mean to say that—really, Mrs. Carlisle, I appeal to you," and he held out the sheet of note-paper almost dramatically.

"My mother agrees with me, sir, that this offer of Lord Norman's must be declined. We have no claim upon his generosity. We are not his relations—we are not even his friends. We have been the foes of his family for years. This suit, which has impoverished and ruined us, has cost him thousands of pounds. He has won it, he has proved to be in the right and we in the wrong, so that for all these years the Carlisles have done him great and lasting injury. And in return he offers us—five thousand pounds!"

Her face was crimson now, the gray eyes flashing, the red lips apart with wounded pride and resentment.

"What right has he to humiliate us?" and her hand closed tightly on the back of her mother's chair.

The lawyer, poor fellow, quite unable to understand the fine feeling which prompted the refusal from the proud and haughty nature of the girl, stared and gasped, and exclaimed, "Good gracious!" again, helplessly.

"Then—then this is your answer, Mrs. Carlisle?" he said.

"Yes. Floris, my daughter, knows what is best. Lord Norman is very kind, he meant kindly, and—and—I thought for the moment that we—"

"For Heaven's sake, ma'am," interjected the lawyer, abruptly, almost pleadingly, "don't throw away five thousand pounds for the sake of a little pride! Put it in your pocket, Mrs. Carlisle—your pride, I mean, and save the money!"

Mrs. Carlisle hesitated, and looked up at Floris, then sighed, for the girl's face was inflexible.

"No other answer is possible than that I have given you," said Floris, quietly..

He got his hat, and looked from one to the other.

"See here, ma'am," he said, "I shall take the liberty of retaining Miss Carlisle's note for twenty-four hours, in case—I say in case—you should change your minds, which I hope to goodness you will. If I don't hear from you by this time to-morrow I will hand your answer to Lord Norman.. But I trust that I shall hear. Good-night, Mrs. Carlisle; good-night, Miss Carlisle."

There was a silence for a moment after the door had closed upon him, then Mrs. Carlisle, who had been shedding a weak tear or two, shook her head dolefully, and wailed:

"What is to be done, Floris? We must go into London lodgings, and—and live on cold mutton and bad sherry."

Floris laughed softly, if a little sadly.

"The mutton need not be always cold, mamma, and as to the sherry, you never drink it, and I hate it. And I don't think we need go into lodgings in London, dear. I think we can stay here still—that is, you can," she added, softly. "This afternoon I was sitting on the lawn with Lady Burton, when she suddenly began to talk of her sister, Lady Pendleton. She had had a letter from her this morning, asking her if she knew of a young lady who would be likely to suit her as a companion. I have thought—of a young lady who might, perhaps, serve in place of the angel Lady Pendleton is looking for. It is a young lady of the name of Floris Carlisle."

Mrs. Carlisle stared down at her with feeble astonishment.

"You, Floris!"

"Yes, I! Why not, mamma? Think of it! Ninety pounds a year and—and a home—" Her voice broke, and Mrs. Carlisle began to cry instanter. "No, no, mamma, we will not cry, either of us."

She rose as she spoke and went to the table.

"I don't know what made me do it, but I asked for Lady Pendleton's address, and copied it in my memorandum-book. Fifty-nine Grosvenor Place. That sounds very grand, mamma!"

She stopped the thin stream of bewailing and bemoaning which Mrs. Carlisle began to pour out, with a kiss, and then went back to the table and wrote a short note.

"There, mamma! I have told Lady Pendleton that I am musical, cheerful, that I love reading the newspaper better than anything else on earth, and as for my looks," she laughed carelessly, "though not beautiful, children do not, as a rule, fly at my approach, and that I have not a positive cast in my eye! Beyond that, she must judge for herself."

She came back with the note in her hand, and threw her arms around the weak-natured mother and kissed her, and as there was no glass Mrs. Carlisle did not see the unshed tears that filled the glorious gray eyes of the girl who was too proud to accept five thousand pounds, but not too proud to go out and work as a servant!

A week later, when the newspapers had about grown tired of referring to the great Norman *versus* Carlisle case, Floris stood in the hall of 59 Grosvenor Place.

"Lady Pendleton? Yes, miss," said the huge footman, with the deepest respect, after a glance at the beautiful face, with the obvious air of good breeding. "Yes, miss, her ladyship's at home."

Floris took out her card-case, but suddenly remembering that lady companions should not carry visiting-cards, said:

"Please say that Miss Carlisle has come."

The footman looked rather surprised, but his respect, for a marvel, did not vanish, and he showed Floris into an immense drawing-room quite civilly.

Floris was trying to form conjecture as to the kind of woman the mistress might be, when the footman returned.

"Her ladyship will be obliged if you will go up to her room, miss," he said.

Floris followed him up a flight of broad stairs, along a short corridor, and entered Lady Pendleton's *boudoir*.

As she did so, a little woman, beautifully dressed, rose from a chair surrounded by a batch of dress materials, and came toward her.

"Is that you, Miss Carlisle? How do you do?" she exclaimed in a quiet, alert, but musical voice, very much what a linnet's would be if it could speak in the human tongue. "How kind of you to come so soon!"

By this time she had reached Floris, who stood with her face to the window, and stopped short, with a stare of open-eyed wonder and delight that would have been amusing if it had not been rather startling.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Why, they never told me—"

Then she stopped again and peered up at Floris, with her little head on one side, and laughed chirpingly.

"My dear, how ridiculously, how absurdly beautiful you are!"

Floris strove hard not to blush at this sudden and knock-down compliment, but the crimson flooded her sweet face.

"Oh, I beg your pardon! That's just me! Offend you the moment you come into the house! But you mustn't mind me, dear; it's my way. Have you had any lunch?" she broke off, her head on one side, her bright, bird-like eyes fixed on Floris's rather bewildered face.

"Yes, thank you, Lady Pendleton," she said.

"You shall have a glass of wine. I'll ring for it. No? Then come and take your things off."

"But," Floris said, "are you sure that I shall suit? I mean—"

"Oh, don't say that you won't stay!" Lady Pendleton exclaimed, pathetically. "Of course you'll suit! I knew that the moment I saw you. I didn't catch your name. What was it, anyhow, my dear?"

"My name? Carlisle—Floris Carlisle.

"Floris! What a pretty name! I wish they had given me a name like that instead of Elizabeth! There was a Devonshire Carlisle I used to know—a very great man. Any relation?"

"Yes," said Floris, gently. "We are Devonshire people"

"Really? How charming! Quite a coincidence, as Bruce would say. I hope you'll like Bruce, my dear. Most people do. Poor Bruce! They say the old gentleman himself is not half so bad as he's painted; and I am sure Bruce is not. He's Sir Edward's cousin, you know."

Floris didn't know, but she murmured "Yes," and Lady Pendleton ran on very fast:

"Poor Bruce! Don't you believe half they say about him, my dear. It is all scandal. But come and take your things off. You look tired. It is my chatter. Sir Edward says I could talk the hind leg of a horse off; but that's his rudeness. I'm sure he talks enough in the house. Come along, my dear; I'll show you your rooms. I hope you won't be dull. I'm glad we've got a dinner party to-night. It will be more cheerful for you; and I'm glad Bruce is coming. But mind"—holding up a tiny forefinger—"no falling in love with Lord Bruce!"

Floris laughed softly.

"Very well, Lady Pendleton, I will not fall in love with Lord Bruce!"

Fateful words!

CHAPTER III.

AN EXTRAORDINARY STORY.

Floris found herself in a small but luxuriously furnished room, which had evidently been prepared for her use, there being a writing-table and book-case, and a comfortable sofa, in addition to the usual furniture of a bedroom. In fact, the apartment was half a sitting-room.

Lady Pendleton followed her and looked round questioningly.

"I do hope you will be comfortable," she said, earnestly. "I know you ought to have a sitting-room of your own; but the house is so small—I mean for suites of rooms."

"Oh, indeed this is very nice and comfortable!" said Floris.

"Well, my dear," said Lady Pendleton, looking over her shoulder, "you will want to rest, I dare say. You'll hear the dressing-bell."

"Lady Pendleton," said Floris, with a sudden flush, "I think you said that you have a dinner party. Had I not better—I mean—shall I not be in the way?"

Her ladyship raised her finely-drawn eyebrows.

"Bless me, no, dear! Besides, it is only a small one. Oh, come down *if* you can. If you would really rather not—why—"

But Floris inclined her head as humbly as she could.

"Oh, no! Of course I will come down if you wish it."

"That's all right," said her ladyship, cheerfully. "Come down by all means. It will freshen you up; not that you look as if you wanted freshening, my dear," and with a very pleasant nod and a little smile she went out.

Floris sank on a sofa in a state bordering on bewilderment. It was all so different to what she had expected. Instead of being received with haughty politeness and freezing condescension, she had been welcomed rather as a friend than a servant.

"Who was Lord Bruce?" Floris wondered; "and why should her ladyship take such pains to inform her of his wickedness, and warn her against falling in love with him?"

It was of him she was thinking when the second bell rang and a servant knocked at the door.

"Her ladyship didn't know whether you would be able to find your way to the drawing-room, miss," she said, and Floris, with her sweet voice thanking her, followed the girl through the corridor and down to the hall.

The big drawing-room was brilliant with innumerable wax candles, and Floris felt too confused by the light, and the hum of conversation, to distinguish any one for a moment, but Lady Pendleton came out toward her from a little group of ladies and nodded pleasantly.

"So glad you have made up your mind to join us," she said, and then with her head on one side she turned to one of the young ladies.

"My new companion, Miss Carlisle: Lady Glenloona."

The lady—whose name Floris remembered as that of one of the fashionable personages of the day—put up her eyeglasses and nodded, with a languid smile, and Floris, to avoid any further introductions, drew a little apart and sat down.

Lady Pendleton flitted away to two or three gentlemen, and Floris was wondering which was Sir Edward, when the door opened and a little man, with a worried, tired look came in, and made for Floris with outstretched hand.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, in a quiet, yet bored voice. "Been kept at the committee meeting. Hope you are not tired of waiting."

Floris flushed and stood up, but at the moment Lady

Pendleton flitted up to them and took her husband, for it was Sir Edward, by the arm.

"That is my new companion, Edward," she said, with a birdlike laugh. "How late you are! Dinner is waiting!"

"I beg your pardon," he muttered to Floris. "Glad to see you."

Then shooting one keen glance at her, he allowed himself to be led away to make his apologies in the proper quarters. But still, though the butler hovered around the room, and the footman hung about as if ready and waiting, dinner was not announced.

"So annoying!" exclaimed Lady Pendleton. "We'd better go in!"

The gentlemen thereupon made for the ladies allotted to them, and there being one or more of the fair sex than of the rough, Floris modestly drew back to follow the rest by herself.

But fate—well, say chance—had ruled that she should not go in alone. As she reached the door, there was a little confusion in the double file, and Lady Pendleton's voice was heard in good-humored complaint.

"Oh, Bruce, here you are! Really, it is too bad! Can't you keep time? Haven't you got a watch? Well, I'm glad you have come! Will you please take in the countess—and you, Mr. Parkis, if you please—"

"Oh, don't disturb yourselves, please," said a voice, deep, full, and yet strangely musical and attractive.

The sort of voice that makes hearers turn their heads to see the speaker. "The voice with a character behind it," as Swift says; and Floris saw a tall figure standing in the doorway. He waited until they had all passed but herself, then came slowly into the room.

Floris looked up and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man with the handsomest face she had ever pictured, and her imagination was not a poor one! But for the moment only one feature of the face struck her—the eyes. Calmly, masterfully, they rested upon her face, as if they took in the whole of her person in an instant, measuring her, weighing her and judging her, mind, body, and soul. One forgot, while under the gaze of those eyes, that the rest of the face was handsome, that the nose was straight, or the lips, as seen under the dark mustache, clearly cut, or the short hair dark or fair; all she could do was to meet those eyes and try to satisfy them.

It was not until he looked away from her that Floris noticed how strangely well the evening dress sat on the stalwart, graceful figure, or that the one ungloved hand was white and shapely as a woman's, yet strong-looking as a laborer's.

Then his gaze returned to her, and with a slight inclination of the partrician, he quickly said:

"I am more fortunate than I deserve. Will you allow me?" and offered her his arm.

Floris tried to call up some commonplace remark, but failed, and in silence permitted him to take her to the dining-room. His place had been reserved for him near the hostess, but with a disregard which in another would have seemed a rudeness, he sunk into the chair next Floris's, and the company had to reshuffle themselves.

"For what we are going to receive," mumbled Sir Edward; the butler, anxious about his delayed dinner, cut the rest short and the meal commenced.

There was a chatter and buzz as the soup went round, but Lord Bruce uttered not a word. He had not spoken when the fish gave place to the *entree,* but he was careful to put the *menu* card near Floris, and once, when a footman, new to his duties, offered her champagne, said "Hock."

Floris wondered whether he meant to maintain silence during the whole of the meal; but suddenly, and yet slowly, and as if he had been talking all the time, he turned his eyes on her.

"Have you been to the concert to-day?"

"No," answered Floris; "I only arrived in London this afternoon. What concert do you mean?"

"Albani's. Don't suppose that I have been; I never go to concerts. Who is that old lady opposite?"

"I don't know," faltered Floris.

"I have seen her somewhere. One never knows half the people Betty gets."

"You must include me in the half," said Floris, with a smile.

"Fairly hit!" he said.

The buzz of conversation went on for a while, then suddenly Lady Pendleton's thin, birdlike voice rose above all the others.

"Oh, Bruce!" she exclaimed, in a little flutter of excitement, "this isn't true that Lady Glenloona is telling me, is it, now? She says that you are getting your yacht ready, and are going to the Levant"

He turned to Lady Glenloona, who did not seem over-pleased at being quoted so publicly.

"Lady Glenloona is always well-informed," he said. "Yes, Betty, I am going to the Levant."

"Oh, it is too ridiculous!" exclaimed Lady Pendleton, with an injured air. "Just as everything is moving too—"

"That is why I am moving."

"Oh, you know what I mean! Don't be provoking! The season is just at its height, and I want to get about! Who is to take me if you go off in that stupid yacht, pray? Can't you go sailing about when the season is over—"

"And it is wet, and cold, and generally stormy? Thanks! Are you fond of the sea?"

The question was addressed to her, not so suddenly, but so unexpectedly that Floris, who had been listening to this passage of arms with curious amusement, turned her face to him a little vaguely.

"The sea? Oh, yes! I don't know much about it. I have never done much sailing, if that is what you mean. It must be very delightful to get away from London while it is hot and sunshiny, and sail about the Mediterranean."

"Yes," he assented, but not very eagerly. "At any rate one may as well do that as anything else."

By this time it would seem as if he had finished his dinner, for he put his arm on the back of his chair, and regarded her with a calm, yet not obtrusive attention, and into his eyes stole the appreciative expression of a keen critic more than satisfied.

Floris, happening to look in his direction, caught his eyes fixed thus upon her, and a faint thrill ran through her, which almost made her angry.

Who was this Lord Bruce, who was treated as a favored mortal, and allowed the privileges of a small despot, and why should he look at her as if she were a picture on approval?

And yet there was nothing disrespectful in the gaze he fixed on her; its very openness deprived it of rudeness and made it a compliment.

"Now, don't let Sir Edward talk you all asleep on politics!" said Lady Pendleton, with charming candor. "And, Bruce, mind you come into the drawing-room. I want you to do something for me."

Floris followed the rest of the ladies into the drawing-room in "fine amaze," as Spenser says. It was her first introduction to such society as that of to-night, and it amused and yet puzzled her.

Lady Pendleton carried Lady Glenloona into a corner to see some plates which she had recently purchased, and Floris, seated a little apart, was left alone. She wondered whether she was expected to do anything, and was quite relieved when Lady Pendleton, looking over her shoulder, said, quite humbly:

"Oh, would you mind playing something, dear, or singing; just to keep us awake till the tea comes?"

Floris thought that it would be far kinder to sing them something to send them to sleep, and going to the piano, played a *sonata.*

She was not a skilled musician, and she knew it; but she had a sweet voice, and waiting until the buzz of talk, which always begins at the sound of a piano, ceased, she sung a simple little ballad.

It was a song which she used to sing to her mother, and she was half sorry that she had chosen it, for it brought the tears to her eyes and made her voice tremulous. Perhaps on that account it affected her listeners, for when she had got through one verse she found the attention of the half-slumbering audience riveted upon her.

Then she began to feel nervous and would have stopped short, but remembering that she was fufilling part of her duties as a lady's companion, she went bravely on.

When she had finished she looked round, and saw that the gentlemen had entered very quietly, and that Lord Bruce was standing near her, his hands folded behind him, his eyes fixed on her face with an expression that was almost sad; instantly it vanished, and gave place to the usual calm impassiveness, and he came close beside her.

"That is a very pretty song," he said, in his low, grave voice. "Will you not sing us another?"

Floris shook her head with a smile.

"You might not think the next one so pretty," she said.

He bowed with a faint smile, as if struck by the answer, and walked away. In an instant Floris caught herself regretting that she had made it, and then, ashamed that she should feel any regret, resumed her former seat.

The footman brought in the tea equipage, and, still intent upon making herself useful, she got up and went to the table.

"Can I help you, Lady Pendleton?" she asked.

"Oh, will you? Thanks!" responded her ladyship, eagerly. "It is very kind of you!" and she gave up her chair with alacrity.

Floris supplied two footmen, and sent them around with the tea, and was pouring out a cup for herself, when she heard two ladies talking behind her in a suppressed whisper and knew that they were talking of Lord Bruce.

"Not going away so suddenly in the middle of the season for nothing," murmured one of them.

"I should imagine not," assented the other, with that eagerness which denotes the scandal-lover. "I wonder what it is. Quite quietly, too. Hadn't even told Lady Pendleton. Some mischief, depend upon it. One does hear such dreadful stories about him! Not that I believe them, or one-half of them! Wasn't there some talk of his being engaged to his cousin, Lady Blanche?"

"Oh, that was some time ago. It would have been a good match for him then, but now things are altered. He doesn't want to marry money. Dear me, I never did believe quite in his affection for Lady Blanche."

Floris, with a strange feeling of disappointment, turned and stopped the conversation by asking them if they would take some more tea, and receiving a cold, haughty negative, returned to the cups again.

Several guests took their departure, and Sir Edward, muttering something about "the house," stole out as if glad to get away; but Lord Bruce still stayed on.

Floris got up and seated herself in a retired nook, and got an album containing the usual number of plain people in unnatural attitudes, when Lord Bruce rose, looked across at her hesitatingly for a moment, then came and seated himself by her side.

"The social pillory," he said, nodding at the album. "Shall I tell you who is who? or, perhaps, you know them all?"

"No; I know no one here," said Floris.

"Then shut it up and let us talk," he said, and he took the heavy book from her and laid it on the table. "Do you know that my cousin—perhaps you don't know that Lady Pendleton is my cousin?"

"No," said Floris.

"She is, alas! or she says she is; I am not quite sure. A cousin fourteen times removed, I think. At any rate, she is so much of a cousin that she thinks that she is at liberty to avail herself of my valuable services."

"Yes," said Floris. "You were going to tell me something—"

"Yes. Well, my cousin fourteen times removed has been exceedingly unkind to-night. I asked her to tell me who and what was the lady I had the honor to take in to dinner, and—she refused. It was ungrateful of her, but I have no appeal excepting to you."

"Oh, I am Lady Pendleton's companion," said Floris, simply.

He did not express any surprise, if he felt any, but leaned forward, his dark eyes fixed on her face.

As they sat thus, Lady Pendleton passed them on her way across the room, and paused a moment to exchange a word.

"How thoughtful you look, Bruce! I really think you must be in love."

He smiled absently, then sat up.

"That was a foolish speech of my cousin's," he said. "But, like the random shaft, it struck home. She is quite right. I am in love."

Floris turned to him with a smile.

"Do you wish me to commiserate your lordship?" she said.

"If you please," he answered, gravely, "and for this reason, that I am in love with a young lady whom I have never seen whose name I have only read. Think of it! To be in love with the mere imagination! Not to know the object of one's passion by sight! to pass her, perhaps, in the street, and yet be unaware that she is she. It is hard, is it not?'

"Very!" said Floris, smiling again.

"Shall I tell you how it happened?" he asked, after a pause, during which several other guests took their departure.

"If you like," said Floris.

"It is a strange experience," he began, in a low voice, with the manner of one communicating with himself as well as addressing a listener. You must know that my family has been under a cloud for several years past—for a couple of generations back. Did you ever read the story of the Old Man of the Sea—the old person who got on Sindbad's back, and couldn't be got rid of?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, we have had an old man of the sea on our family back; his name was 'Chancery Lawsuit'—What is the matter?" for Floris, whose eyes had been wandering round the room dreamily, started slightly and looked at him.

"Nothing," she said, averting her eyes again! "Please go on."

"The suit has been running for generations, and it has made each generation poorer than the last, so that the old man threatened to kill Sindbad right out. I, as the last of my family, was reduced to—well, perhaps I had better not tell you all that I was reduced to, in case you should not believe me; and I should not like that."

Floris listened to the leisurely, musical voice with a growing wonder in her mind. How singular a conincidence! He had described the actual state of the Carlisle family!

"Now comes the extraordinary part of the story. Lo and behold! with very little warning and no great fuss to speak of, the great case comes to a close, and greatly to my astonishment I am informed that I am the victor. The particulars and details I allowed to go, but the main result was satisfactory. I was proclaimed the victor, and learned that a great portion of the lands and moneys and houses were coming back to me. Judge of my astonishment when I was informed by my lawyer that my deadly foes were represented by two women; an old lady and her daughter— What is the matter?"

Floris had started with a sudden movement, and her face had flushed, then turned pale.

"You are tired! I forgot that you had traveled some distance to-day. Pray forgive me! My story will keep till some other time!" and he half rose.

"No, no!" said Floris, in a very low voice. "I am not tired, I am not, indeed! Pray go on! I am very much—interested, my lord!"

He was silent for a moment, and then resumed.

"Yes, an old lady and her daughter. I asked how the result of the trial would affect them, and was told that they would be nearly ruined. That is to say, that in addition to losing the estate we had been squabbling over, they would have to pay their own costs of the last trial. I asked the amount, and learned that it was five thousand pounds."

Floris sat perfectly motionless, but her fingers clasped each other so tightly that where they met the flesh went whiter than snow.

"I was startled and perplexed and upset. I am not an impulsive man, but I acted on an impulse of the moment, and requested my lawyers to tell the other side that I should consider it an honor if they would permit me to pay their clients' costs. I am sure you are tired," he broke off, as Floris leaned back and put her fan up to her face.

"No," she answered, almost curtly; "please go on."

"Well, the lawyers wouldn't accept the money without consulting their clients, and so—and so"—he paused, as if he were coming to a part of the story which was not pleasant in the telling—"one of them went down to make the offer. Now, you are a woman, what do you think was their answer?"

"I cannot guess. You must tell me, please," murmured Floris.

He was silent a moment, then with his eyes fixed thoughtfully on the glass, he said:

"They refused. It was an unkind thing to do. It was as if I had insulted them and they had raised their small hands and struck me. I say 'they,' but in reality it was the daughter, the girl. The mother would have accepted, but the daughter refused emphatically, sternly and scornfully. If you want to know how scornfully, read this," and he drew a sheet of note-paper from his waistcoat-pocket.

Floris turned her eyes toward it, but did not offer to take it.

"I will read it," he said, "so that you may understand exactly how I feel:

"'A Carlisle demands justice, not charity, and having received the former, has no desire to become the recipient of the latter, even though it should be at the hands of the Earl of Norman.'

"That was her reply to my offer. It struck me like a blow! If it had come from a man I should have put it in the fire, shrugged my shoulders, and forgotten it. But from a young girl! I cannot forget it, though I have tried hard to do so. I have thought of her so much during the last week, since I got this note, that she has become part and parcel of my life. I am, as it were, under a spell. Her scornful eyes are always resting on mine, inspiring me with the intense longing to try and soften them; her voice rings in my ears, so that I am possessed with a restless desire to hear her utter some kinder words, more fitting to her sweet, girlish lips. In short, from thinking about her, I have grown to love her—to love a thing of aerial imagination, a woman whom I have never seen and probably never shall see, who, if I met her, would turn from me as from one who had done her a great wrong and inflicted a heavy insult! Now, please, do you not even pity me?"

Floris sat silent, her face hidden by the fan, which fluttered to and fro slowly, as if moved by a machine, her eyes downcast, her lips quivering with the shame and torture of her situation.

"You do not? I am sorry. Somehow, I expected your sympathy, and that is why I told you my story. I have told it to no one else, and I shall not tell it. But it is quite a true one, and the fascination, the spell under which I am held is so great that I am going to try strong measures to get rid of it. In a mind diseased—no, I will not say diseased—possessed by such a delusion, illusion, charm, spell, whichever you like to call it, there is no cure like change of scene. Therefore you understood, though my cousin never will, for I shall never tell her, why I have ordered my yacht and am off to the Mediterranean. I am going to take the vision of Floris Carilsle out with me, and drop it, with the memory of it, in the blue sea, in the hope that it will sink, and rise to haunt me no longer. As for the note, well, I will keep that to remind me when I am old and gray, and on the verge of the grave, that I once loved a girl whom I had never seen, and whose only words addressed to me were the written ones of scorn—contempt!"

There was a subtle music in his voice that rung deep down in Floris's heart and made her tremble.

She tried to rise, and had succeeded in making an effort, when Lady Pendleton flitted toward them.

"My dear Bruce, how kind of you to stay! And what have you two been talking about?" with her head on one side.

"I have been giving miss—this young lady—an account of the various fishes and shells to be found within the Mediterranean circle, my dear Betty," he answered, instantly, and with calm gravity.

"Really? I didn't know you knew anything about them, or anything else that was useful. It is very good of you to listen to him, my dear"—to Floris. "And now, Bruce, about this fancy fair. You must stay for it! I must have you down among the patrons. See how well your name would read! 'Patrons: H. R. H. the Prince of Wales, etc., etc.—all the royal family, you know—and then 'the Right Honorable, the Earl of Norman—'"

Floris's head sunk lower. Yes, his name was Norman! But why, oh, why had she not known it before? Why did they call him Bruce?

"I'll think it over and let you know in the course of two or three months, Betty," he said rising.

Lady Pendleton shrieked.

"Two or three months! Why, the fair is next week! You are the most provoking of men, Bruce; now isn't he, Miss Carlisle?"

The name was spoken at last.

He was looking for his opera hat while she had been speaking, but at the sound of the name he stopped and turned silently, but slowly, round upon them.

"What on earth is the matter? Why do you look at her like that? Why, Bruce, you have grown quite pale; hasn't he, dear?"

"What name did you say?" he asked, his eyes fixed upon Floris's downcast face with its closely-shut lips and white brow, wrinkled under her burden of shame and confusion.

"What name? Whose name? Miss Carlisle's! This young lady's name is Miss Floris Carlisle," and she laid her hand on Floris's arm.

CHAPTER IV.

"I ALWAYS HATED YOU."

CARLISLE! Lord Bruce Norman stood with his hat in his hand, his eyes fixed on Floris's face, his own almost stern with the shock of surprise the name had caused him.

As for Floris, she tried to meet the intent gaze with a calm, steadfast regard, but her eyes drooped, and her face grew flushed.

"Why, yes! And why not? What is the matter with you

Both?" demanded Lady Pendleton, volubly. You look as if you had seen a ghost, Bruce, and you, Miss Carlisle, as if you had been caught doing something especially naughty!"

Lord Norman was one of the first to recover.

With a grim smile he took his eyes off the beautiful, downcast face, and turned them to his cousin with a kind of pitying amazement.

"Don't be alarmed, Betty," he said, quietly; "I didn't know that I had caught the name rightly. I think I will go now," and he gave her his hand, his eyes wandering again to Floris's face, pale and proud once more.

"Now mind, Bruce!" exclaimed Lady Pendleton, clinging to his hand, and covering a yawn with her fan at the same time. "You are to come to-morrow, and help us with your valuable suggestions about the fancy fair costumes; isn't he, my dear?"

"I will not promise," he said, abruptly. "Good-night."

He held his hat in his hand, looking to see if Floris would extend her hand, but she merely inclined her head, and with a very low but stern bow he left them together.

Lady Pendleton dropped into a chair with a little laugh and looked at the door through which he had passed.

"Dear Bruce! Isn't he handsome, my dear? Not dollified, you know—I hate your pretty men—but right down handsome."

"Why do you call him Bruce—and not Lord Norman?" asked Floris, almost abruptly.

"Because we always called him Bruce while his father was alive, and can't get out of the way now, my dear," said Lady Pendleton. "We used to be playmates. I was always a favorite of his. Perhaps—" she sighed, then laughed. "But he was so poor and Sir Edward was so pressing. You've no idea what a good fellow my husband is, my dear!" quickly—"the very best in the world! And now, good-night. Shall I come up to show you your room?"

But Floris would not permit this, and assuring her ladyship that she could find the way by herself, went to her own room.

When she fell asleep, after hours of wakefulness, it was but to dream that Lord Bruce stood before her, the fatal sheet of paper in his hand, the dark eyes fixed reproachfully upon her.

Lord Norman descended the steps, and stood for a moment looking absently out at the quiet street, but when a cab pulled up, he shook his head, and strode off with the air of a man too restless to sit quiet. He passed out into Park Lane and down beside the railings, and crossed the road into Oxford Street.

Then he paused, half resolved to go to his club, but turned westward instead, and reaching a quiet street beyond the marble arch, rung the bell of one of the houses which, palatial in size, was divided into sets of chambers.

Ascending to his own suite, he opened the door with his key, and entered a luxuriantly decorated and furnished sitting-room.

The rays of the lamp, standing on the sandal-wood table, fell upon Persian hangings and Fez china, on delicately inlaid Chippendale chairs, and tapestry-covered lounges.

For some time he walked to and fro, his brows knit, his dark eyes flashing with the intentness of his thoughts; then he drew the sheet of note-paper from his pocket, and held it over the lamp, as if he had suddenly arrived at some decision. But as the paper began to curl and turn brown with the heat he drew it away.

"No, I cannot! What is the good of burning it when the girl's face, and her voice, and the very turn of her head, possess and haunt me! How beautiful she is! How beautiful!"

With a sigh he turned out the lamp and went into the next room. It was the dressing-room, between the sitting-room and bedchamber, and was dimly lighted by a shaded lamp, held in the hands of a Venus Aphrodite.

There was a couch and a couple of chairs, besides the inevitable bath, and Lord Norman was taking off his coat, when suddenly from the couch there rose a man.

Lord Norman started, and stood perfectly motionless. With a yawn the man stretched himself and stood upright, and, in doing so, presented, in form and feature, an almost perfect copy of Lord Norman himself. Excepting that the earl was in evening-dress and the man in a well-worn suit of serge, the resemblance in figure was almost complete.

Lord Norman did not start, but stood as if turned to stone. The awakened man yawned, and stared vacantly for a moment, then, rubbing his eyes, exclaimed:

"Is that you, Bruce?"

"Raymond!" exclaimed Lord Norman, sternly. "What brings you here? Why have you come?"

The man called Raymond laughed out loud.

"That means a long story; and you hate long stories, don't you? You always did! I've come from Australia. Why have I come? Because I'd nowhere else to go! Where should I go, but to my old friend, Bruce Norman?" and the visitor smiled with ineffable satisfaction, as if he had answered the question completely.

"How did you make your way in here?" Lord Norman asked.

"I told your man—capital valet you've got, Bruce!—that I was your brother, and, convinced by the likeness that I spoke the truth, he let me in!"

"Listen to me, Raymond," said Lord Norman, regarding him gravely, and almost sternly; "if any one were told that I found you lying here in one of my rooms at midnight, they would conclude that, as you are no relation of mine, there was some tie of friendship or interest between us, would they not? Beyond the fact that we were school-fellows, that we spent some foolish, youthful days together, and that you are said to resemble me, what claim have you upon me?"

"None at all!" responded the other, after a moment's pause. "Did I ever say that I had?"

"Acts speak more plainly than words sometimes. Why are you here in my rooms at midnight?"

"For the best of all possible reasons, my dear Bruce! Because I haven't anywhere else to go. I'd go to a hotel if I could, but I haven't a penny. Of course, if I am unwelcome I will go. I don't need to be told twice. You are looking well—and yet slightly worried; that comes of being a noble, you see! Now, if you were simple Oscar Raymond, you would look as careless as I do. Good-night," and he took up his hat, a soft felt, much the worse for wear, and moved toward the door.

"Wait," said Lord Norman, following him. "I am sorry that I spoke harshly to you; but when I saw you so unexpectedly, I remembered one or two similar visits that you had paid me in the old days; I could not forget that I had given you a large sum of money to enable you to leave the country, and—"

"I ought to have stopped there," Raymond finished for him. "So I ought. But, upon my word, Bruce, five years —of stone-breaking is sufficient for any man—"

Lord Norman looked at the white hands significantly.

"When I say stone-breaking, of course I speak figuratively. If I haven't been stone-breaking, I have been doing things equally unpleasant."

"Well, I will give you some money," said Lord Norman. "I don't ask you to leave England again, but I do trust that your visits to me will be few and far between."

As he spoke—not unpleasantly, but with a grave smile—he went to a cabinet, and, unlocking a drawer, took out some money, and without counting it laid it on the table.

Raymond's dark eyes gleamed for a moment in a peculiar fashion, which transformed his handsome face into anything but a pleasant one; then, with a sudden laugh, he took up the money and dropped it into his coat pocket.

"Thanks!"

Lord Norman turned to the cabinet and took out a decanter and a glass and some biscuits.

As he did so his sleeve knocked down an ivory box, and a pack of cards fell out. While he was filling the glass with wine, Raymond's eyes were fixed on the cards, and the same gleam which had shone in them before now lighted them up.

Slowly he drunk the wine and set the glass down, then he stooped and picked up the cards, and in an absent kind of way, began to shuffle them.

"Do you remember the *écarté* we used to have, Bruce?"

Lord Norman nodded.

"You used to play a good game—almost as good as I did. It is some months since I touched a card."

He glanced at the clock, and turned his face, with a smile of peculiar winningness, half playful, half mournful, to Lord Norman's.

"Bruce, let us have one game! Just for auld lang syne! Humor the returned wanderer upon whom you have lavished your gold—by trying to win it back again!" and he laughed a soft, musical laugh that few would have been able to withstand.

Lord Norman, with a shrug of the shoulders, dropped into a chair beside the little table.

The game proceeded. Raymond chatted and Lord Bruce replied now and again in indifferent monosyllables; and the luck, which had smiled on the earl from the beginning, remained faithful until one solitary sovereign stood beside Raymond's elbow.

"The last!" he exclaimed. "Let us see whether it will follow the others, or call them back!"

Strange to say, the luck seemed to change, and game after game fell to Raymond. His face grew flushed, his eyes sparkled. A pile of gold and notes stood on the spot where the solitary sovereign, had stood and Lord Norman, with a smile, rose to fetch some more money from the cabinet.

As he did so he happened to glance in the small mirror over the mantel, and saw something that made him turn crimson and then pale and stern.

He said nothing, however, but brought some notes and gold from the cabinet and returned to his seat.

The game proceeded and reached a point at which the first man who scored would win.

Raymond held the cards in his hand, and looked up suddenly.

"Bruce," he said, "this must be our last game! What do you say now, double or quits?"

Lord Norman nodded, and with a dexterous movement Raymond swept his pile of money into the middle of the table.

"Double or quits!" he said. "By heavens, if I win this I will swear never to play another game—until the next opportunity!" and he laughed. "Are you ready? It is your deal! Now I mean to play my very best."

"Just so," said Lord Bruce, "but before we begin, hadn't we better see whether all the kings are in the pack!" and very quietly, but with terrible strength, he seized Raymond's arm, forced it up, and took the king of diamonds from his sleeve.

There was a moment's awful silence as the two men looked into each other's eyes—like the reflection of one face, so alike were they in features, but fearfully unlike in expression.

Slowly Lord Norman got up.

"Raymond, you were once a gentleman—or I would throw you out of the window. Go!" and he pointed to the door.

Raymond got up slowly, and as if with difficulty, and moistened his lips.

"Bruce, I swear to you that—that this is the first time—"

Lord Norman then smiled, a cold, awful smile.

"Oh, do not think that I am about to deprive you of your booty, sir. You forget that I could not take it back"—and he pointed to the heap of money—"you have touched it!"

Raymond stretched out his trembling hands and drew the heap toward him, then with a sudden gesture of renunciation, he raised his dark eyes with the sinister gleam in them.

"No! I will not take it. But some day, perhaps, Lord Norman, you will wish that I had! I always hated you, but, before Heaven, I never hated you as I hate you to-night! Take care, or I shall pay you back for that insult! Take care lest the cheat, whose very touch you deem defilement, prove clever enough to win his revenge!"

Without another word the detected cheat passed out.

Lord Norman stood musing grimly for a few minutes. It was quite impossible to sleep in his present mood, and he thought he would take a turn in the now quiet streets. As he passed westward, he came to a large house standing at the corner of a square. The house was the town residence of the Duchess of Cliefeden, and a ball was in progress. There was just time to look in, and with a listless step he entered, passed through the crowd of footmen, who recognized him and made way with respectful alacrity, and ascended the stairs. The immense saloon was still crowded, though the ball was drawing to a close, and Lord Norman could only make his way slowly through the throng of dancers and the knots of people chatting and laughing together.

He found the duchess at last. Her grace was looking very sleepy and rather bored, and she almost frowned as Lord Norman came up.

"Aren't you ashamed to come near me?" asked her grace.

"I am. Quite!" he said, quietly. "And I have come to tell you so."

He remained for a few minutes, until he had won her forgiveness for his late appearance, then wandered on again.

"If you are looking for Lady Blanche you will find her in the south anteroom. At least she was there five minutes ago," said her grace; and he went to the anteroom leading to the grand staircase.

Seated on an ottoman was a very beautiful woman, just past girlhood. She was very fair, with thick, silken hair that was almost the color of pure gold, its brightness being relieved by eyes of dark, velvety brown, that at certain times were almost black, and eyebrows of rich auburn. In addition to her grace and her beauty, Lady Blanche was possessed of that rarest gift in woman—an exquisite voice, capable of arresting the attention and keeping it as closely fixed while she spoke as if the hearer were under a spell. She was an heiress in her own right, with houses and lands enough to make the penniless sons go wild with longing. They thronged round her, and tried their hardest to win her, but to one and all she had only one answer—the soft, clear monosyllable:

"No!"

Lord Norman stood at the entrance of the anteroom, looking at the group within. They made quite a picture, the little circle of men—young and old—with the beautiful woman in the center, leaning back, with her face moving to and fro listlessly, her dark eyes fixed dreamily on the ground, the colorless cheeks swept by the long, black lashes.

Suddenly she raised her eyes and saw Lord Norman standing in the doorway; it would be too much to say that she blushed, but the faintest of all possible colors flickered in her cheeks, and her eyes grew softer and lighter for a moment before they were lowered to the ground again.

Lord Norman advanced to the group, and the man who had been bending over her and endeavoring to engage her attention, looked up, saw who it was, and with a shrug of resignation at once straightened himself and made room.

Lord Bruce changed greetings with some of the men, then sunk down beside Lady Blanche, and in a few minutes the little circle of courtiers, like jackals at the appearance of the lion, quietly vanished.

"Where have you been, Bruce?" she asked.

"I dined at Lady Betty's," he replied.

"Yes, I know," she said, with a smile. "But since? It is nearly three."

"I have been to my rooms."

Slowly the dark eyes were raised to his face, rested there for a second or two, as if they were reading every line in then the soft voice murmured, listlessly:

"Has Lady Betty found a companion yet?"

He leaned back and looked around the room carelessly, too carelessly by far, before he answered:

"Yes."

"Ah, yes, I remember! Mr. Parks told me. A remarkably pretty girl, with black eyes."

"No, they are gray," he said, and in that short speech he had told her all she had been quietly angling for. Her eyes drooped, but not before a swift light had shone in them, and the fan closed and fell, feather-like, in her lap. He had noticed this girl so particularly as to remember the exact color of her eyes.

Unknown, unguessed at by all, there lay hidden behind that calm, placid exterior, a latent passion, which burned within her heart as the fire beneath an Iceland geyser. The fire glowed fiercely at this moment, fed by the oil of jealousy, but there was no trace of emotion in the soft, equal voice, as, rising, she said:

"Will you find papa, Bruce? I would like to go now!"

He got up and gave her his arm, and hunted for Lord Seymour, whom they found yawning in a corner, evidently just awakened from a nap, and with the old peer grumbling drowsily at their heels, they went down to the hall.

With extreme care and gentleness he arranged the fur cloak round the white shoulders, and put her into the carriage.

"You will come and see me to-morrow, Bruce?" she said.

"Yes, of course. Good-night," he replied, and turned away.

The carriage door closed, and the overfed, fidgety horses sprung forward so suddenly that they nearly knocked down a man who was crossing the road at the moment. The coachman, with a carefully suppressed oath, pulled up short, and the man got to the pavement. As he did so, Lady Blanche looked out to see what was the matter, and the man caught a glimpse of her face, upon which the light from the windows was now streaming. In an instant Raymond—for it was he—recognized the original of a portrait which he had seen in Lord Norman's room. More than that, he had caught in the dark eyes and colorless face a look of passionate jealousy which Lady Blanche had suppressed while Lord Norman had been with her.

It was not much for a man to work upon as a leverage for doing a fellow-mortal an injury, but Oscar Raymond was not an ordinary man, and it was enough for him.

With a smile and a nod, he crossed the road, and, setting off at a jog-trot, followed the carriage to Lord Seymour's house in Eton Place.

CHAPTER V.

A HARD PUNISHMENT.

FLORIS was just finishing dressing on this her first morning "in service," and the breakfast bell was clanging through the house, when she heard a knock at her door, and a strong voice, with a decidedly French accent, requesting permission to enter.

Floris opened the door, and saw a tall, thin, French girl, with small, dark eyes that instantly fixed themselves on Floris's face, and just as quickly sought the ground again.

"Pardon, mam'selle, I am her ladyship's maid. Her ladyship's"—she paused just a second—"compliments"—Lady Pendleton had said "love"—"and would mam'selle kindly attend at milord's breakfast table? Miladi is unwell."

"Certainly," said Floris. "Will you tell her ladyship that I am sorry she is unwell, please?"

The girl bowed, and Floris hurried down-stairs. She was late; and it was a bad beginning; but she had slept but little, and that restlessly. The French maid made a pretense of following her, then she stole back to the bedroom, and, with deliberate carefulness, made a complete examination of the wardrobe and every article of Floris's which she had left unsecured.

"Ah, yes!" she murmured. "A fine lady, but poor! No rings, no bracelets, no rich dresses; but beautiful, and miladi will think her an angel! Bah! I shall hate her! I know it! I feel it! Something tells me that Mam'selle Carlisle and Josine will be at daggers drawn. We shall see!" and with a shrug she arranged a wisp of her black, coarse hair in the glass and left the room.

Floris hurried down-stairs to the breakfast-room. A footman was carrying in some hot dishes, and Sir Edward was seated at the table with the *Times*—containing a full report of his last night's speech—and a heap of letters.

He rose as she entered, and his weary face lightened for a moment at the vision of fresh, young beauty, and his eyes rested upon the simple cotton dress, that fitted so admirably, with an expression of vague admiration and satisfaction.

"Lady Pendleton is unwell this morning; but no doubt they have told you," he said, as if anxious to avoid any unnecessary words.

"Yes," said Floris, with ready tact. "I am very sorry. Coffee, Sir Edward?"

Sir Edward glanced at her approvingly. Had his wife at last got a treasure? At any rate, a girl with such a face, and such ready tact as to condense a question into two words, must be worth having.

She gave him his coffee, and took some bacon in exchange, and Sir Edward ate his breakfast, looked over his speech, opened his letters, and penciled drafts of the answers in the corner for his secretary to amplify.

Presently he pushed the letters from him, and took up his cup, regarding her attentively.

"I hope you are—that you will be comfortable with us, Miss Carlisle," he said.

"I am sure that I shall, sir," she answered.

He knocked his spoon against his cup thoughtfully, with a preoccupied air.

"If there is anything you require—but my wife will see to that—I meant to say, that if you want anything in the shape of reading, please get what you want from the library. Here is the key."

It was a great concession, if Floris had only known it.

A servant came to the door.

"The brougham, Sir Edward."

He jumped up with the alacrity of a clerk making a dash for his train or 'bus, and commenced to bundle his letters into a dispatch-case with one hand, while he took up his coffee-cup with the other.

Floris rose.

"Will you let me put them in for you?" she said, quietly, and neatly and quickly she packed them in orderly fashion in the case.

"Thank you, thank you!" said Sir Edward. "I've a committee meeting this morning at eleven, another at one, and—thank you!" and with a final glance of surprised satisfaction, he seized the case from Floris, his hat and cane from the servant, and hurried out.

The next question now arose: what was she to do next? It occurred to her that she would go up and ask how Lady Pendleton was. She went and knocked at her ladyship's door softly, and received the response of "Come in."

"It is I, Lady Pendleton," she said, thinking that she might have mistaken her for the maid.

"Come in. Yes, I knew it was you, my dear; I knew by your knock. All the rest of them hammer," said her ladyship.

She was sitting up in bed, wrapped in an elaborate dressing-robe, with a cup of chocolate by her and a French novel face downward on the satin coverlet.

"Are you better?" asked Floris.

"Yes, it was only a headache. I hope you enjoyed yourself last night, and weren't too tired! I am sure you ought to be very gratified—it was enough to make you vain, my dear."

"To make me vain?" queried Floris.

"Yes, the attention you got. Especially from Bruce! I never knew him so attentive. As a rule he is quite too savage—a perfect boor! I've known him to sit for an hour and not open his lips, and then get up and go away. I do hope he won't go on that stupid yachting excursion until after the fair! Of course, you will help me at my stall! You will create quite a sensation, my dear, and that will be so nice!"

Floris laughed softly.

"Why do you laugh, my dear? Are you laughing at me?"

"Certainly not, your ladyship," said Floris. "But—but I was wondering whether it would not be rather out of place for a companion to make a sensation."

As she spoke the maid came in, with the slightest apology for a knock.

"Lord Norman's in the drawing-room, miladi."

Lady Pendleton uttered a little cry of delight.

"So soon! My dear, he has come to say that he will stay over for the fair! I thought that he would! Oh, dear, and I'm not dressed! Do go down and see him now, Floris! Tell him I have a headache—caused by his obstinacy last night."

"Perhaps he will wait until you are dressed," said Floris, in a low voice, "or call again later in the day, Lady Pendleton?"

"Wait till I am dressed!" exclaimed her ladyship, with a laugh. "Not he! He wouldn't wait for an empress."

Floris still stood by the window, with Josine looking from one to the other in respectful silence.

"Will you not write him a note?" suggested Floris.

Her ladyship laughed again.

"He would scarcely read it! My dear, you don't know Bruce. He is one of the most trying of men. No, you go down and see what you can do with him; please do, and secure him for the fair."

Floris went out of the room and down the stairs. She paused for a moment at the drawing-room door, and the flush gave place to a cold paleness that lent an air of pride and reserve to her sweet, beautiful face.

Lord Norman was sitting across a chair, his arms folded on the back. He was dressed in a riding suit of broad check, and held a whip in his hand.

"Well, Betty," he said, without looking round, "have I roused you from your slumbers sweet and deep?"

Getting no answer, he turned his head and saw Floris standing in the middle of the room, the sunlight falling upon her fresh, young loveliness, and lighting up streaks of gold in her brown hair.

He sprung to his feet, dropping his whip, and went toward her.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured. "I thought—"

"Lady Pendleton has a headache, my lord, and has not yet left her room," said Floris, and in her effort to seem perfectly self-possessed, her voice sounded cold and repellent.

"I am very sorry," he said.

Then he stood switching his leg with his whip for full a minute.

"I will tell her ladyship," said Floris, and she half turned to the door.

"One moment, Miss Carlisle," he said. "I—" he stopped, and his dark eyes flashed toward her face—"I am favored by chance in thus seeing you so soon—and alone."

Floris stood calm and cold as a statue, but with a heart that fluttered in her bosom like an imprisoned bird.

"I will avail myself of the opportunity which chance has given me, Miss Carlisle, to beg your pardon."

"My pardon?" said Floris.

"Your pardon," he repeated; "and I do beg it most humbly. Last night, in complete ignorance of your name and identity, I made a statement, moved by an impulse which was too strong for my control, that must have sounded in your ears like an impertinence. Miss Carlisle, I humbly beg your pardon!"

Floris raised her eyes for a moment to look at him, then dropped them again.

"It is granted, my lord," she said, coldly. "It was my fault; I ought to have stopped you; I ought to have told you who and what I was."

"My foe—the woman I have, all unintentionally, ruined," he murmured.

"No, my lord, you have done me no injury. If we have suffered, it is through the law."

There was a moment's silence, during which he stood looking at her and flicking his whip restlessly, then Floris raised her eyes.

"Her ladyship requested me to ask you, Lord Norman, if you would remain in England and assist her in the fancy fair?" she said, reluctantly.

He turned toward her.

"Are you going to take part in this affair?" he asked.

"I do not know. I shall do so if Lady Pendleton wishes me, my lord."

"Are you interested in this fancy fair? Do you care whether I remain for it, or are you simply the mouthpiece of Betty?"

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me, my lord, whether you remain or go," she replied, haughtily.

"Oh, I know that!" he rejoined, hastily. "You misunderstand me! I know that my presence must be hateful to you, and that if you could have your wish you would never see me again. I am quite cognizant of your feelings toward me, alas! But for the fair's sake, would you wish me to stay, Miss Carlisle?"

"I know nothing about it," said Floris.

"Then please tell Betty that I don't care a fig for her fair; that I won't have anything to do with it, and that if she uses my name I will never forgive her," he said, morosely.

"Very good, my lord," she said, and turned to leave him.

He waited until she had reached the door, then spoke her name.

"Wait," he said; "I have changed my mind. You can tell her that I will do what she wants in this fool's business, and she may stick my name, if it's of any use to her, all over the place. Is that any better, Miss Carlisle?"

"I have no doubt that Lady Pendleton will think it much the better answer to her message," said Floris, with perfect self-possession. "Good-morning, my lord."

"One moment more, please," he said, reluctant to let her go. "I think you said last night that you were fond of music?"

Floris inclined her head. She did not remember saying it; but as it was true she let the assertion pass.

"I have bought a box for the opera for Betty and you," he said. "Will you tell her that I will call for her soon after dinner?"

Floris bowed, without a word of thanks.

He strode toward her and held out his hand.

"In token of your forgiveness, will you shake hands, Miss Carlisle? I have noticed with more pain than I can describe that you have hitherto refused to do so."

Floris extended her soft, white hand slowly, and he took it and held it firmly grasped in his—so firmly that she could not withdraw it.

Lord Norman got on his horse and clattered down the street. He got the best box he could that was vacant, then rode to Covent Garden and purchased a couple of very handsome bouquets.

Directing these to be sent to his rooms, he turned his horse in the direction of Eton Place, and as he neared it, the cloud on his face by no means lightened.

A groom took his horse round to the stables, and a footman, in answer to his inquiry for Lady Blanche, at once admitted him and passed him on to another, who showed him upstairs into a small drawing-room.

Lady Blanche, in her riding habit, was seated at a table writing a letter. She did not rise as he came in, and merely smiled as she held out her hand.

"It was very good of you to come so early," she said, in her soft, low voice, which if he had loved her, would have made him turn and take her in his arms, so inviting and caressing was it.

"Oh, I have nothing else to do," he said. "What did you want me for, Blanche?"

"Well, for one thing, to ask you about the Lynches. They have asked us to Ballyfloe for the first fortnight in the autumn. I would not give an answer until I knew whether you were going, because—well, the reason is too obvious. Are you not immensely flattered, sir?"

"Very," he said, forcing a smile, and feeling uncomfortable and guilty. "My dear Blanche, don't throw the responsibility on me! You might not enjoy yourself, and then what remorse would fall to my lot!"

"Oh, I shall enjoy myself," she said, "especially if you come down."

He beat a tattoo on the window with his whip.

"Then of course I will go down to Ballyfloe."

"How kind of you, Bruce!" she murmured.

He bit his lip. He had just left one beautiful woman, who could find not one gracious word for him, and here was another who thanked him for nothing at all. And yet in his heart he felt as if he would rather have had the one gracious word from Floris than the sweetly-voiced thanks of Lady Blanche, and cursed himself for a fool because it was so.

"And what is the other thing?" he asked, more genially.

"Oh, it is about this fancy fair of the duchess's, Bruce. She has asked me to take a stall. Would you go if you were me?"

"My dear Blanche," he protested, with a laugh, "how can I possibly tell what I should really do if I were you? Go, I suppose."

"Very well, I will go. And, Bruce, you won't mind helping me, will you?"

"I should be very glad, Blanche, but I have promised to perform the same vague office for Lady Betty."

She did not relax her smile, but her white eyelids dropped over the brown eyes for an instant.

"Really! Well, I must look out for some one else."

"Were you going for a ride?" he asked, getting away from the very awkward subject.

"Yes, and you are riding, too! Do you mean to come with me, Bruce?"

"If you will allow me," he said.

She looked pleased, and, crossing the room, rung the bell and ordered her horse. As she did so she saw something sticking in the lining of his hat.

It was the box ticket, which, after the manner of forgetful men, he had placed it in this conspicuous position. She bent forward and looked at it, then came back to him.

"Are you going to the Crown-brilliants to-night, Bruce?"

"No, he replied. "I am tired of the Crown-brilliants.

They always have twice as many as the rooms will hold; last time I was nearly suffocated."

"Come and dine and spend the evening with us, then," she said.

"I can't, Blanche, to-night; I have an engagement."

"I am sorry," she said, sweetly.

"The horse, my lady," announced the servant.

Lord Norman went for his hat; but Lady Blanche begged him to wait for a moment.

"I have forgotten a note I want to write," she said, and in her slow, graceful manner she sat down and wrote a line or two, declining the Crown-brilliants, and on half a sheet of paper scribbled, "Get a box at the opera for to-night."

"I am quite ready now," she said, and as they passed out she handed the note and the paper to the footman.

The park was full as they entered the ring, and hats flew off the men lounging over the rails as the two passed.

They walked and cantered round the ring of tan for an hour, she bowing to the endless string of friends and acquaintances, he noticing no one; then, with a sigh, she said:

"You must not stay any longer, Bruce! You want to go to your club for lunch! It is very good of you to have come with me; I know how you hate this kind of thing!"

He started slightly.

"Nonsense!" he said; but all the same he turned his horse at once.

As they rode down Eton Place, a man who had been lounging at the corner smoking a cigar, looked up and stared at them, then, as they came abreast of him, he put up his hand as if to arrange his hat more comfortably, and, in doing so, completely hid his face.

Neither of them saw him, and if Lord Norman had done so, he would not have recognized Oscar Raymond.

It was Floris's first experience of theatre going, and her heart beat fast with curiosity and excitement; but amid it all she could not help noticing the calm, masterful way with which Lord Norman escorted them through the crowded entrance in the *foyer*.

Two attendants ushered them into their box, the overture was just beginning, and dazzled and excited, Floris leaned forward and gazed fixedly at the stage. As she did so, a score of opera glasses were leveled at the box, and Lady Betty smiled significantly at Lord Norman.

"I told you so," she whispered, leaning back to him. "I knew she would create a sensation! She is the most beautiful girl here, Bruce!"

He frowned, and, as if by accident, drew the outer curtain so that it screened Floris. The opera commenced, and all Floris's eyes and soul were concentrated on the stage.

The sad, miserable story of human frailty and human suffering developed itself, and amid the most intense silence, Nilsson sang her great song.

As she had finished, a tremendous uproar of applause arose, and Floris, moved beyond herself, raised her bouquet and threw it, with a passionate gesture, at Nilsson's feet. It was done on the impulse of the moment; the next she looked round almost with affright, but Lord Norman bent over her with a smile.

"That was nicely done," he said. "See! she is smiling up at you!"

Floris bent over the box and met the great prima donna's smile, and her heart seemed to stand still. Then a huge wave of remorse swept over her; she had thrown away the flowers he had given her.

Almost as if he read the thought he said:

"You could not have applied them to a better use, Miss Carlisle. Besides, they were your own to do as you wish with."

The curtain drew up on the last act, and Floris was bending forward to catch the first notes of the music when, suddenly, some persons entered the box exactly opposite their own.

She would not have noticed the fact, but at the moment she saw Lady Betty lean back and catch at Lord Norman's arm, and heard her whisper gently, in a startled voice:

"Bruce! Look! There is Blanche!"

She would not have noticed the fact, but at the moment she box, and saw a beautiful face with dark-brown, velvety eyes fixed, with almost fierce. scornful scrutiny, upon her.

CHAPTER VI.

BEWITCHED.

Right across the magnificent opera house the two women looked at each other.

The expression of the fierce jealousy which had flamed forth from Lady Blanche's eyes passed and vanished in a moment, and nothing but a calm, indolent, almost indifferent gaze met Floris's one of frank admiration.

Lord Norman stood behind her chair, calm, impassive, apparently deaf and blind to all around him, with that *sang-froid* which his admirers declared was unique and inimitable. He had seen the flash of jealousy dart across the threatre, had seen the hot flush on Floris's face, but for any sign of recognition, he might have been indeed blind. Lady Pendleton, however, looked uneasy at his immovability, and began to fidget and cast glances at the opposite box. Presently she turned her head.

"Hadn't you better go across, Bruce?"

"Presently," he answered.

The opera proceeded, and presently the great scene arrived. Nilsson was in beautiful voice that night and Marguerite's sweet, plaintive, soul-stirring death song rose and filled the house with its wonderful, pathetic sweetness.

Gradually, Floris's face grew pale, her lips quivered, the tears gathered in her eyes and trickled slowly, like great diamonds, down her cheeks.

Never had she looked more lovely, more heart-moving; and as the *blasé* man of the world watched her, he felt an awful longing to take her in his arms, to bend and kiss the tears from the star-like face; as it was, his own face went pale under the spell she was, all unconsciously, weaving round him, and the hand resting on the back of the chair, touching her dress, trembled. He could not resist the longing to speak to her, and bent over her, murmuring:

"No, no! Do not! It is not even worth that!"

Without moving her head, Floris turned her eyes toward him, with a half shame-faced smile, and wiped her eyes.

"I am glad, and yet so sorry—so sorry it is over!" she murmured, as the curtain fell. "Who could help crying?" And she laughed tremulously.

"You see we have all of us seen it so many times," said Lord Norman in his low voice, which seemed meant to reach her ears alone; "and we get hardened. But I am glad you are enjoying it."

"Enjoying it! I have never been so happy in my life!' exclaimed Floris. A light shone in her eyes for a moment.

"You make me very happy," he said in a low voice.

Instantly her manner changed, and the old, proud look came into her eyes.

"Are you not going now?" she said, turning to Lady Pendleton.

"Oh, there's a ballet, isn't there, Bruce?" asked Lady Betty. "Please let us stay for the ballet. One always goes home so very miserable after 'Faust' without the ballet."

"By all means," he said; then he got his opera hat, and left the box without a word; and Floris felt that she had wounded him by her cold repulse.

Lady Pendleton shrugged her shoulders.

"At last!" she exclaimed, confidentially. "I thought he was never going. I assure you, my dear, I have been most uncomfortable. He ought to have got up and gone round directly she came in."

"Lady Blanche Seymour, do you mean?" asked Floris, indifferently.

"Of course. How well she is looking to-night," said Lady Betty, putting up her opera glasses. "She has got on one of Worth's latest. Certainly I will say that Blanche knows how to dress. I don't know anyone who wears diamonds so well. Did you see her look across at us as she came in, my dear?"

"Yes, I saw her look across—yes."

Lady Betty laughed with a little malicious enjoyment.

"Blanche and I don't get on very well together, you know. I fancy she thinks I take up too much of Bruce's time. Ridiculous, isn't it? I can not help his being nice and attentive, can I? I don't think she liked seeing him here with me; she considers that she has the monopoly in poor Bruce. Look! There he is. How handsome he is! Really I don't think there is another man in the house with such a figure and—and—style, to say nothing of his face."

Floris looked across and saw Lord Bruce standing beside Lady Blanche's chair. He was talking, but not bending over her as he had bent over Floris; and Lady Blanche was speaking to him with her face turned almost completely away.

The orchestra began the overture to the ballet.

"I wonder whether he means to remain there for the rest of the evening!" said Lady Betty, with the pettishness of a spoiled child. "I suppose he will deign to come and see us home?"

The curtain drew up, and Floris turned to the stage and gazed at the magnificent scene spellbound. So enwrapt was she that she did not hear the box door open, and it was not until she felt his hand upon her chair that she knew Lord Norman had returned.

"Well?" he said, and if he had been offended he had regained his temper, "not so good as 'Faust?'"

"No, but it is very beautiful! More beautiful than I dreamed it could be!" said Floris. "They seem to float on air; how they must enjoy it!"

"Was she very angry, Bruce," Floris heard Lady Betty whisper.

"Blanche, do you mean?" he asked, coldly, as if reluctant to answer.

"Yes, of course. I know she was angry, because she smiled at me so sweetly while you were going round, and avoided us so completely when you got there."

"You have wonderful intuition, Betty," he said, calmly, and turned to Floris instantly.

"Can you make the story out?" he said. "They are dancing an opera, instead of singing it, you know."

"I think I can," said Floris, "but I am not sure."

He drew a chair near to her, and leaning forward, explained the action of the ballet with a patience and earnestness which would have astonished many who knew him, his eyes fixed on her face with grave intentness the while. As he was speaking, there came a knock at the door, and a voice said:

"May I come in, Lady Pendleton?"

Lady Betty startled and uttered a bird-like cry of delight and surprise.

"Why it is Bertie! Is it you, Bertie?"

"Guilty, my lady!" answered the voice, so pleasant and merry a one that Floris turned her head.

"Bruce, open the door!" exclaimed Lady Betty. "It is Bertie Clifforde."

Lord Norman got up and opened the door, and a young man, a very young man, entered. He was tall and graceful, with fair hair that clustered in curls on his brow; a soft fringe of gold above his upper lip promised a mustache; his eyes were blue, and full of life and joyousness; and his lips were curved in a smile which almost made Floris smile to look at them.

"Why, Bertie, where have you sprung from?" demanded Lady Betty, laughingly.

"From Canada," he replied. "Been out there for the big game, you know. How well you are looking! I am so glad to see you! How lucky I dropped in to-night! And Bruce, too!" and he released Lady Pendleton's hand at last and took Lord Norman's. "So awfully glad to see you, Bruce! It seems ages since we met! And how well you are looking! I am awfully lucky! Do you know I hesitated outside for a moment before I came in! Never expected to see you, you may be sure, or I should not have paused a moment!" and he wrung Lord Norman's hand again.

Then his joyous blue eyes turned to Floris, questioningly. She had her face toward the stage, and Lord Norman made no offer of introduction, but Lady Betty leaned forward and tapped Floris on the arm.

"My dear, let me make you acquainted with an old friend—I beg your pordan, Bertie! A young friend—"

"Now, Lady Pendleton!" murmured Lord Clifforde, with meek reproach.

"Lord Clifforde, Miss Carlisle."

Floris turned her head and bowed, and Bertie, as Viscount Clifforde was usually called, started slightly, flushed, and then bowed. Lady Betty laughed with pleasant maliciousness. She saw the effect Floris's beauty had made upon the boy.

"And so you have just come from Canada, Bertie?" said Lord Norman.

Bertie responded with a smile and a laugh, and began to tell them some of his adventures. Floris scarcely listened, but the clear, fresh voice reached her ears and chimed in not inharmoniously with the music. All the while he was talking, the young viscount's eyes were wandering toward her, and in a pause of the conversation he drew near Lady Betty and leaned down to whisper:

"Who is she, Lady Pendleton?"

"My companion, Bertie. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Hush!" he whispered, with a bright blush that many a woman in the theatre would have given her suite of diamonds to possess. "Hush, she will hear you! She is lovely!"

He drew nearer to Floris, and seeing her opera cloak had slipped to the floor of the box, stooped and, picking it up, put it on the back of her chair.

"Thank you," said Floris, looking round at him, and reading in his eyes the direct, obvious desire to speak to her, she slowly moved her chair so that he might draw his near.

But when he had seated himself close to her, he did not seem to know what to say.

"Have you been long in London?" he asked, almost timidly, but his eyes showed the interest he took in her.

"Only a day or two," said Floris. "This is the first opera I have ever seen."

"Really!" his blue eyes expanding. "How jolly! I wish I had come earlier!" then he blushed. "Has Bruce—Lord Norman—been here all the time?"

"Yes," said Floris.

"Dear old Bruce!" he said, glancing slightly to the back of the box where Lord Norman leaned, looking at the door, "I am so glad to see him again."

"You are old friends?" said Floris, very quietly.

"Oh, yes; we were at Eton together; that is, I was there a couple of terms before he left, and we have seen a great deal of each other since. He has been awfully kind to me, taken me about, and put me up at his clubs. I am very proud of being his friend; there are so few fellows he is really intimate with. It is just good luck my meeting him here to-night. I heard at the club that he had sailed in his yacht."

"Lord Norman is staying in London to help Lady Pendleton at a fancy fair," said Floris.

"Really! A fancy fair! How jolly! I wonder whether she would let me help. I'll ask her!" he said, resolutely, and he got up and went to Lady Betty.

Lord Norman came forward, as if he had been waiting.

"How do you like my friend Bertie, Miss Carlisle?" he asked.

"Very much," replied Floris. "He has gone to ask Lady Betty to allow him to help her at the fancy fair."

"She will be delighted. Bertie is what is called in theatrical circles, 'a safe draw.' He is the pet of society; it is a wonder he is not spoiled."

"I don't think I should say that he is not spoiled," said Floris, with a smile.

Bertie came back to her chair, as she spoke, flushed and radiant.

"I am accepted, miss—" he stopped.

"Carlisle," put in Lord Norman.

"Miss Carlisle! I shall work awfully hard! There are lots of things I can do. You will see! We'll make a big success of it."

The curtain fell amid a thunder of applause, and Lady Betty, with a little yawn, shut up her fan and looked around.

"Don't you wait, Bruce," she said, with a significant glance at the opposite box. "Bertie will take charge of us."

A frown gathered for a moment on Lord Norman's brow.

"What have I done to be summarily dismissed?" he said.

"I was thinking for your own good, Bruce," she whispered.

"Pray let me think for myself," he said.

Then he went to put on Floris's cloak, but Bertie, with hands that almost trembled in his eagerness and delight, had got the cloak in his hand, and was reverently arranging it on her shoulders; then he offered her his arm, and Lord Bruce was left to escort Lady Betty. The two men conducted the ladies from the box into the crowded *foyer,* and Bertie dashed off to find the carriage, which he managed, by dint of hard work and the bribe of a sovereign, to bring to the door just five minutes before its time. Then he went back to the saloon, looking superbly handsome, with his fair face flushed with his exertions. As he entered he saw Lord Norman, as he thought, standing by the door.

"Why! Where are the ladies, Bruce?" he exclaimed.

The man addressed looked at him for a moment, then turned, and was instantly swallowed up in the brilliant crowd thronging the corridor. Bertie looked after him with astonishment, then mechanically made his way to where he had left the three, and found them standing in the same spot, waiting for him. He stared at Bruce with amazement, and in silence, for a moment.

"What's the matter, Bertie? Has the carriage flown away?"

"Why! how did you get here again so soon, and without your overcoat?" asked Bertie, open-eyed.

"I have not left the saloon since you went, of course," returned Lord Norman.

"But I saw you outside here a minute—a second—ago!" retorted Bertie.

Lady Betty laughed.

"What nonsense you talk, Bertie!" she exclaimed. "Bruce has not left us; how could he?"

Bertie colored.

"I have made a stupid mistake," he said, penitently. "I have got the carriage."

They went down without another word, but as they descended the stairs he looked from left to right searchingly.

Lord Norman and he put them into the carriage, and Lord Norman stood by the window a moment after he had shut the door.

"Good-night," he said in his low, musical voice, and speaking to Floris. "I hope you will not be tired in the morning."

"Thanks," she said, calmly.

The carriage moved on very slowly; and Bertie seized the opportunity to press forward.

"I may come and talk about the fair, to-morrow?" he said, eagerly.

"Yes, yes; do," said Lady Betty, putting out her hand. "And make haste back! You have no hat on, and will catch cold!"

He laughed his frank, boyish laugh, and, as if in echo, Floris laughed, too, and held out her hand.

He flushed with grateful pleasure and seized it, getting nearly run over for his pains, and stood looking after the carriage until it was lost to sight.

Lord Norman watched him with a smile on his face.

"Don't they wear hats in Canada, Bertie?" he said.

The young viscount started, and laughed apologetically; then sent a man to the saloon for his hat.

"Oh, Bruce, what a lovely creature!" he exclaimed, in a low voice, as he locked his arm in Lord Norman's Lady Betty's companion! Do you know her well, Bruce? How glad I am that I came back, and that I dropped in to-night!"

Lord Norman stopped again and looked at him, with something like a frown and a smile commingled.

"Now, Bertie, don't play the fool. I know what this rhapsody means. You are in love for the five hundred and ninty-ninth time!"

The young viscount raised his head and looked at him. His face went pale, and his blue eyes were almost solemn in their earnestness.

"No,; for the first time, Bruce. Don't chaff me. I—I don't think I should like it. Yes, I am in love," he went on, almost defiantly; "and I am not ashamed to own it. I feel as if I had been bewitched."

He put his hand to his brow again, and his face went pale.

"Don't chaff me. I'm serious this time, Bruce."

"So you have assured me quite a dozen times before," retorted Lord Norman.

"But I have never felt like this. There, don't let us talk of it, Bruce."

"But we will," said Lord Norman, almost sternly. "Listen to me, Bertie; I know about as much of you as you do yourself. You are Viscount Cliforde, with an old title and an empty purse. You are good-looking, confound you, as a picture, and you have got to take your good looks into the open market, and do your duty in that state of life, etc. And that duty is, to marry an heiress as soon as you conveniently can."

The boy blushed, turned pale and then sighed.

"Now, Miss Carlisle is not an heiress; she is penniless, or next door to it, and Lady Betty's companion; and the sooner you get over your infatuation the better!"

Bertie stood silent for a moment—they had reached the door of Lord Norman's chambers—then he looked up.

"It is all very well for you to talk like this, Bruce. You do not know what I feel. I don't think you were ever downright in love."

"No?" said Lord Norman, with a strange smile.

"But you 'mean well,' as they say, and perhaps you are right. I'll call on Lady Betty to-morrow, and start off for—oh, anywhere!"

"Do," said Lord Norman.

"Lord Cliforde!" said Lady Betty, as Josine opened the door of the *boudoir* and made the announcement.

The room was in the wildest confusion, littered with the contents of a huge box, which had just arrived from Paris, containing a selection of Swiss costumes, slightly altered and beautified by a great master. Floris was kneeling before the glass trying on wihte linen caps and kerchiefs.

"Bertie, my dear! How attentive of him! Show Lord Clifforde up," she said, and presently they heard him coming up two stairs at a time.

He stopped at the door, aghast and blushing at the sight of the finery and the occupation of the two ladies.

"Oh, I beg pardon! I thought the girl said 'upstairs.'"

"Oh, it is all right! Come in, Bertie. You are the very man we want," said Lady Betty, holding out her little paw. "We are too busy to receive visits of ceremony this morning, but if you like to take us as we are you are quite welcome."

"What an awful litter! How do you do, Miss Carlisle?"

Floris held out her hand, without getting up from her knees, and he bent over it.

"What a fine lot of dresses! Rather gorgeous, aren't they?"

"Color is everything at a fancy fair," said Lady Betty, with an air of conviction.

"Color and cheek!" said Bertie.

"Sir!" exclaimed Lady Betty, with mock severity. "We did not admit you into our *boudoir* to receive your impertinence."

"Beg pardon, Lady Betty!" he retorted. "I meant color and—confidence."

"Then we had better give you a stall all to yourself, Bertie," said Lady Betty. "Now tell me how I look. Isn't this quite a Swiss girl's get-up?"

They tried on several other caps and kerchiefs, and Bertie was asked his opinion on each and all, till he must have become rather confused; then he said suddenly, as if he had been bracing himself up for the announcement:

"It is very kind of you to show me these things, Lady Pendleton, because—because, you see, I sha'n't be able to see them at the fair."

"Why not?" demanded Lady Betty.

He glanced at Floris as she knelt at the box replacing the costumes.

"I—I find I have to go down to my uncle's place; I'm overdue there now, and he gets rather rough if I don't show up pretty often."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Lady Betty. "I'm sure he won't mind waiting a week or two longer for you; I shouldn't if I were your uncle. You must help us with the fair, Bertie! You will be of no end of use; won't he, Floris?"

Floris didn't answer, but she smiled assentingly.

"There! You hear what Miss Carlisle says."

"I didn't hear Miss Carlisle speak," says poor Bertie, all his heroic resolutions of flying from temptation slipping away from him."

"I beg your pardon!" said Floris. "I am sure you would be of great use, Lord Cliffordc, and I hope you will be able to stay."

"If you say so," he said, "of course I will stay. My uncle must wait. Let me see, what can I do?"

Then he sat down again, and eagerly plunged into the subject.

"I'll tell you what I can do," he said. "I'll be a fortune-teller, or something of that sort, in a cave; or have a show, and stand outside with a big drum. 'Walk up! Walk up, ladies and gentlemen! Just going to begin!' That sort of thing, you know, eh, Miss Carlisle?" and he turned his handsome face to hers, with a radiant smile in his blue eyes that made Floris smile in return.

"Look here! I'll go and get some properties, dresses, and all that, and arrange something. Good-bye. You leave the show business to me!" and shaking hands, he took his departure, "all in a glow with love," as Moore says.

In the afternoon Lord Clifforde came again, making profuse apologies for the intrusion. But he wanted to consult them about the "show."

"I think I'll give a kind of entertainment—recitals and songs. We can rig up a tent or something of the kind and charge five shillings for admittance."

"A guinea! Nothing will be less than a guinea!" said Lady Betty, decisively.

Bertie looked rather glum.

"Rather a dear entertainment!" he said. "Never mind! You'll take the responsibility of the charge for admission and how about the songs? I've bought one or two. I thought that perhaps"—he hesitated and glanced at Floris, who was seated at the window with a book— "I thought that perhaps you—or Miss Carlisle—would try them over for me."

"Oh, I never could play an accompaniment,' said Lady Betty. "Floris, my dear, will you try them over for him."

Floris rose at once and went to the piano, and, with a suppressed delight, Bertie unrolled his songs.

"I'm afraid they are rather foolish," he said; "but the young lady at the music shop assured me that they were all the rage just now."

He stuck one up on the stand, from which it fell off, as usual, and in his scramble to recover it, his hands clasped Floris's.

All innocent and unsuspecting she laughed, and put the music in its place, but a red flush flew to Bertie's face for a moment, leaving it pale and agitated, as he stood beside her looking down at the music.

"There!" she said, playing the prelude. "I think it is rather pretty. Will you try it?"

He started, and tried to smile carelessly, then began. The emotion that had taken possession of him gave a thrill to his really beautiful voice, and the lines rang out with exquisite feeling and harmony. "My sweet girl love, with frank, gray eyes!" He looked at her. Was it possible that she should not guess he was thinking of, singing to, her!

Suddenly, while he was still singing, the door opened and, unseen by either of them, Lord Norman entered. He stood looking at them—at the lovely face of the girl, at the handsome, enraptured one of the young viscount—in silence and motionless; and as he looked a strange pain gnawed at his heart, a pain which stung and hurt him terribly, though he tried to crush it down.

With a soft, lingering tenderness, Bertie dwelt on the last note until it died away sadly, then he looked down at her—indeed he had kept his eyes rivited on her most of the time.

"Will that do?" he asked, humbly.

"You sing it beautifully," she answered, frankly. "I think Lady Betty is right, a guinea will not be too much to charge for admittance to your entertainment."

"How good you are to me!" he said, in a low, tremulous voice.

Floris started at the tone rather than the words, and looked around. As she did so she saw the tall, stalwart figure of Lord Norman standing regarding them, and with a flood of crimson suffusing her face, she rose.

"Please do not get up," he said, and his voice sounded very grave and almost grim. "I will go at once if you allow me to disturb you. Please sit down and play again. Bertie, I should like to hear you sing that again."

But Floris, pale and proudly cold, said:

"I will tell her ladyship that you are here, my lord," and with a bow glided from the room.

Bertie stood looking after her, aghast for a moment, then he turned to Lord Norman.

"What's the matter, Bruce? Why did she go like that? Have I offended her, do you think?" and the color actually deserted his handsome face.

"You!" said Lord Norman. "No, my dear Bertie. It is nothing, not much at least. Miss Carlisle happens to dislike me—not without cause—and flies from my presence. That is all," and he laughed, but there was a strange bitterness in the laugh, and he turned his face away from Bertie's gaze of surprise.

CHAPTER VII.

A ROSE BEYOND PRICE.

THE great day had arrived, and Lady Pendleton and about a score more of fashionable ladies were in the seventh heaven of delight.

For months little else had been talked of "in society" but the fancy fair in aid of the funds of the Society for Improving the Condition of the South Sea Islanders.

The thing had been got up on a most magnificent scale, utterly regardless of expense, and the great hall adjoining the Botanical Gardens had been transmogrified into a very fair representation of a Swiss village. It was a pretty, beautiful sight, which if it could have been transferred bodily to the boards of a theater, would have made the fortune of a manager; and at the opening ceremony "society" thronged in and filled the place almost to suffocation.

Near the center of the hall stood Lady Betty's *chalet*, and in front of the open window, with its assortment of dolls, antimacassars, smoking-caps, babies' clothing, indifferent oil pictures, and bead slippers, stood Lady Betty, supremely happy in Monsieur Worth's idea of a Swiss costume. Never had Lady Betty been so happy; there was only one thing that prevented her being perfectly so, and that was Floris's respectful but firm refusal to stand outside the stall with her.

If she could have done so without offending Lady Pendleton, Floris would have declined to take any part in the affair at all, but as Lady Betty had made a point of it, she had reluctantly consented, stipulating, however, that she should be permitted to keep in the background. As the only "background" possible was the inside of the gimcrack *chalet*, she had taken refuge in it, and stood well in the shadow looking on at the strange scene.

Exactly opposite her was the *chalet* kept by Lady Glenloona, with Mr. Parks, the famous gossip, close at her elbow. A little lower down she saw the stately figure of the Duchess of Cliefeden standing in front of her stall, and next her, in charge of a shop that seemed running over with flowers and fruits, stood the tall, graceful figure of Lady Blanche.

Ivory white, as usual, calm and impassive as an iceberg, but extremely beautiful in her gray dress and white cap, Lady Blanche surveyed the scene as if it had been got up expressly for her behoof and amusement.

All the rest of the crowd in the pageant faded from Floris's sight, and she seemed to see only that lovely white face, with the dreamy, velvet eyes. She was so absorbed in contemplating her that she almost started when Lady Betty thrust her head inside the *chalet,* nearly knocking off the monstrous cap, and exclaimed in half-irritable, half-excited tones:

"Provoking, isn't it? It is just like Bruce! One of the patrons, too! He ought to have been here at the opening."

Then Bertie Clifforde's pleasant voice was heard outside.

"Here we are, Lady Betty, as the clown says! Splendid house, isn't it? How are you getting on?" As he spoke he looked about the *chalet* eagerly. "Where is Miss Carlisle?"

"Oh, inside there," said Lady Betty, radiant again. "What a tremendous success, isn't it, Bertie?"

"Splendid!" he assented, his blue eyes peering into the dusty interior of the stall anxiously. "Splendid! All the world and his family here! May I come in, Miss Carlisle?"

"I don't think there is room for two," said Floris, with a smile, as he stood at the low door with bent head. "How is your show getting on?"

"Oh, all right," he replied. "I've got a big *chalet,* and they have made a platform up, and presently I'm going to get 'em in at a guinea a head."

The crowd thickened. Lady Betty was driving a fine trade in bead slippers and antimacassars, and Floris and Bertie between them were fully occupied in taking money and giving change. The music, performed by the Coldstream band at the end of the hall, was deafening, the heat stifling, and Floris was wondering whether the South Sea Islanders would fully appreciate the efforts on their behalf, when a tall, stalwart figure, which she would have known amid a thousand, sauntered toward the stall.

"Bruce!" almost shrieked Lady Betty. "At last! Now, really, you ought to have been here an hour ago!"

"A thousand pardons!" he said, in his quiet way. "I have been detained by a meeting of the committee of the Jockey Club. Sold all your rubbish—I beg pardon—useful articles? Where is Miss Carlisle?" and his dark eyes roved around the stall.

"Inside," said Lady Betty. "Now, Bruce, what are you going to buy?"

He scarcely seemed to hear her.

"Anything. An antimacassar, pair of slippers—ah, Bertie!" with a nod. "Glad to see you at the good work!" Then, as Bertie made room for him, he bent his head and passed the narrow door-way. "Good-morning, Miss Carlisle," he said.

Floris bowed. She was busy giving change at the moment, and did not look up, so that he did not see the sudden flush which swept over her beautiful face.

Bertie fidgeted and looked around.

"I'll go and see to my show," he said, and disappeared.

"I hope you are taking in a great deal of money, Miss Carlisle," said Lord Norman.

"Yes, I think we are," answered Floris, still avoiding his gaze.

"Floris," said Lady Betty, cheerfully, "look him out some pretty, useful things."

"Such as dolls and tea-cosies, Miss Carlisle, please—"

He went inside, and Floris turned over the things, laughing the while.

For all his declaration of indifference, he was a long while making his selection, and his dark eyes were more often fixed on the lovely face beside him than upon the fancy articles.

"What will you do with all these?" asked Floris.

"Heaven only knows!" he responded. "But I am not cleaned out yet. Is there anything here that you have worked or made yourself?"

"No," said Floris; "Lady Pendleton bought them all."

He glanced at a red rose lying on the snow-white kerchief across her bosom.

"There is only one thing I see here that I really care for," he said, thoughtfully.

"Is there? What is it?" asked Floris, innocently looking over the heap. "I thought I had shown you everything. Is it that writing-case?"

"No, but I'll take that. No, it isn't that, Miss Carlisle; will you sell me the rose you wear?" he asked, respectfully, almost reverentially.

Floris crimsoned for a moment, and her eyes drooped; then the cold *hauteur,* which, alas! came so easily to her, overspread her beautiful face.

"It is not for sale, my lord."

"Forgive me," he murmured, penitently. "You are right. It is beyond price—in my eyes, at least."

Obeying a sudden, uncontrollable impulse, she snatched the rose from her bosom and flung it to the ground.

He stooped and picked it up, and held it out to her, with a look on his face that thrilled her.

"Has it become so hateful to you because I coveted it?" he said, sadly. "Please put it back to show me that I have not sinned beyond forgiveness. I promise not to offend again."

She took the rose, hesitated a moment, then, instead of replacing it in the kerchief, laid it down on the table.

"Some one else might covet it," she said, simply.

He bowed his head, laid a small pile of gold beside the flower, then, without a word, raised his hat and went out.

Floris stood for a moment motionless, her color coming and going, her heart beating fast and furiously, then she took up the rose and thrust it gently inside the bosom of her dress.

Lord Norman strode down the avenue between the rows of shops as if he were making for the door; but as he came opposite the flower-stall kept by Lady Blanche, she came outside and called him.

He stopped and went up to her, his face still dark and gloomy.

"What will you have, sir?" she asked, mimicking the tone of an ordinary shop-woman. "Lilies are very fashionable just now."

"Anything you like. What foolery it is!"

"Isn't it? But it does good, I suppose. Lady Glenloona says that we shall clear four or five thousand pounds. Shall I make you a bouquet?"

"Great heavens, no! What should I do with it? Here, Blanche, I'll give you five pounds if you'll let me off with a single flower."

"Very well," she said; "but don't think you are over-liberal, Bruce. A gentleman just offered me a ten-pound note for the camellia in my hair. A single flower! Bruce, what do you say if I give you my camellia?" and she looked up at him with infinite tenderness in her soft, brown eyes.

"Better keep it for some millionaire who will bid a thousand or two, Blanche," he replied, carelessly.

"No," she said, slowly, "you shall have it, Bruce, and for your paltry five pounds. There it is. Let me fasten it in your coat—do you know that that makes it worth at least twenty? There," and she put it thorugh his button-hole.

He laid a five-pound note on the stall.

"Bruce"—very softly and willingly—"you must wear my flower at the ball here to-night."

"I don't know that I'm coming."

"That is nonsense. Everybody is coming. You will wear it, Bruce?"

He nodded.

"If I come, Blanche," he said, and as he strode on, Lady Blanche shot a glance of triumph toward Lady Pendleton's *chalet*.

CHAPTER VIII.

A FAVORITE.

THE fair was over; the amateur shop-women had rolled home in their carriages, the secretary of the Society for the Improvement of the South Sea Islanders had collected the money, some thousands all told—goodness only knows, and no one very much cared, how much of it reached the South Sea Islanders—and an army of carpenters was at work clearing away the *chalets* to make room for the ball.

Bertie, very tired, and rather hoarse from shouting "Walk up!" outside his show, and singing inside it, had gone off to his club to dress and get some dinner, and Lady Pendleton was lying down, but far too excited to sleep.

"A tremendous success, my dear!" she said to Floris, who was helping Josine to put away the Swiss masquerade dresses. "Enormous! But what fearfully hard work! I am very glad I don't keep a shop. I used to think it must be quite pleasant to serve in one of the large linen-draper's places, but I've changed my mind now. And you must be tired, too. I wish you'd go and lie down for a little while."

"I am not tired," said Floris, "and I would like to stay and help Josine."

"There is no occasion for mademoiselle to trouble," said the girl, smoothly. "Mademoiselle looks quite haggard with weariness and *ennui*," glancing at Floris's face, fresh as a flower and as little haggard as a child's.

"My looks do me an injustice, Josine," Floris said, pleasantly; she was always pleasant with the girl, though she had a suspicion that Josine disliked her.

"I think if I had a cutlet and a cup of chocolate sent up I should like it better than a dinner down-stairs," said Lady Pendleton. "You wouldn't mind keeping Sir Edward's company, would you, my dear?"

"Certainly not. Shall I tell them to send you up the cutlet—"

"Mademoiselle need not trouble," broke in Josine, with a jealous flash of her eyes. "I will charge myself with her ladyship's commands."

"No, you see to it, Floris, my dear; will you?" said Lady Betty, with a yawn, and Floris left the room.

Sir Edward came in for his dinner, looking worried and preoccupied as usual.

"Lady Pendleton played out, I suppose?" he said. "Just what I expected. I am afraid you are tired out, too, Miss Carlisle?"

"No, Sir Edward," said Floris, and he glanced at her cheerful face with an air almost of relief and enjoyment.

"Everybody seems tired out nowadays," he said. "The world is going too fast. You have had a very great success, I hear; I met Lord Clifforde on the steps of the club; he says you have netted a very large amount."

"Thanks in no small measure to his lordship," said Floris, quietly. "He has worked very hard indeed."

"Oh, he likes it!" said Sir Edward. "He was in the best of spirits. Very different to Lord Norman, whom I saw for a moment."

"Yes?" said Floris, examining the *menu* card with close attention.

"Yes; the thing seems to have bored him, and put him out of temper. He wanted to quarrel with me for letting my wife and you take any part in it. As if I could help it! Bruce has all the ignorance of an unmarried man. By the way, I see they are putting him in the society papers. I brought a *Report* home with me—ah, here it is. That is the paragraph. 'We understand that there is a prospect of a speedy alliance between the noble families of S—y—r and N—r—n.' Seymour, Lady Blanche, you know, and Lord Bruce. Was she there to-day? Of course, though—"

"Yes, Lady Blanche was there," said Floris, calmly, as she laid the paper down beside her plate, and Sir Edward little guessed the pang which his innocent communication had caused her or the shame with which she battled against it.

"Are you going to the ball, Sir Edward?" she asked.

"I am sorry to say I shall not be able," he replied, without any great exhibition of sorrow either in his face or in his voice.

"Have got to speak to-night, and must be in my place. I asked Lord Clifforde to look after you."

Floris longed to ask if Lord Norman was going, but could not force herself to do so; but Sir Edward's next words made the question unnecessary.

"I don't suppose Bruce will go; he only grunted when I mentioned it to him. Do you care about any dessert? If not, and you will excuse me, I will leave the table," and with a sigh, the hard-worked statesman trudged off to his study to think out his speech.

Floris went up to her room, and got out the white dress which she had bought for state occasions. It was a very simple affair of cashmere, almost devoid of trimming, save for a line of swan's-down at the neck and on the sleeves, and as she looked at it, she murmured, with a smile:

"Miss Carlisle's costume will not attract the attention of the fashionable reporter, at any rate, but though it may be neither rich nor rare, it is, I think, suitable to her station."

While she was changing her dress, there fell from it the crumpled flower which she had refused to sell to Lord Norman, and as she looked at it lying on the floor, her face went as red as the rose itself.

How respectfully, almost reverently, he had begged for it, and how coldly she had denied him! Was it possible that her refusal had put him out of temper?

She laughed with self-mockery at the idea.

"I am growing foolish," she thought, "and all because the Right Honorable Earl of Norman chooses to amuse himself with Lady Pendleton's companion! What have I done, or said, that he should presume to act as he does? I suppose he thinks a servant a fair target at which to practice pretty speeches," and, with a bitter smile, she pushed the rose aside with her feet.

But a moment later she stooped and picked it up.

"No, I will keep it and wear it to remind me of my folly," and she placed the crimson flower inside the bosom of her white dress.

She had scarcely finished dressing when Josine knocked at the door, and scarcely waiting for permission to enter, came in.

Her dark, beady eyes took in the whole of Floris's attire at a glance, then sought the floor.

Miladi would be glad if you would trouble yourself to come to her, mademoiselle," she said. "And miladi desires me to assist mademoiselle with her toilet."

"Thanks, Josine, but I am dressed," said Floris.

The dark eyes surveyed her coldly.

"Pardon! Mademoiselle's hair could be arranged more effectively."

"I dare say," said Floris, carelessly; "but I won't trouble you, Josine. It does not matter," and she passed out before her, and, as usual, Josine peered about the room, and turned over everything Floris had left about.

"Dressed already!" exclaimed Lady Pendleton. "Oh, my dear, what a lovely dress!"

"Lovely!" echoed Floris, with a smile. "Oh, Lady Pendleton, it is as simple as it can possibly be!"

"I don't care whether it's simple or not—perhaps that is it. It's perfectly ravishing! Don't come near me all the evening, mind, or you will make me look like a May-day sweep!" and she laughed.

Floris laughed with her, then suddenly her eyes glistened as she looked down at the little woman.

"You are very kind to me, Lady Pendleton," she said, softly.

Lady Betty looked up at the glass.

"I wish you would do my hair like Miss Carlisle's," she said to her maid.

Josine crimsoned and set her teeth. This, after she had informed Floris that her hair was capable of improvement!

"I know not how, miladi."

"Then—do you mind, my dear?—let Miss Carlisle do it," said Lady Betty.

The girl stood for a moment as if transfixed, then laid the ivory brush on the table, and stood with folded arms, while Floris, willingly enough, arranged Lady Pendleton's hair as nearly like her own as possible.

"Oh, thank you, my dear! There, Josine, that is how I like it done. I wish you'd learn to do it like that. Remember, now, will you?"

"Yes, miladi," said the girl, between her closed lips; "I will remember. Oh, yes, miladi. I will not forget," and her white teeth clicked viciously.

"The carriage, my lady, and Lord Clifforde," announced a servant at the door.

Bertie, dressed with the minutest care, and looking handsome enough to turn the head of a Diana, received them in the drawing-room with enthusiasm.

"I say!" he exclaimed, under his breath, his blue eyes fixed on Floris.

"There! I told you so!" said Lady Betty, dramatically. "Now, Bertie, speak the truth, and don't flatter or exaggerate. Isn't that dress simply lovely?"

Bertie blushed, but Floris smiled quite calmly and carelessly.

"I don't know," he said. "I only know Miss Carlisle looks like one of Millais's pictures; is it the dress?"

"Thank you, my lord," said Floris, laughing and courtesying.

He blushed again, opening his lips as if about to speak, then took up his opera hat and led them to the carriage, into which he put them with extraordinary carefulness, as if they would fall to pieces if roughly handled.

The hall was crowded when they arrived, but though Bertie, with a lady on each arm, had to almost fight his way in, their appearance created what is called in newspaper parlance "a sensation."

Never had Floris looked more beautiful than she did tonight in the simple, white dress, with its trimming of swan's-down; and before they had been in the room a quarter of an hour, Lady Betty, much to her delight, found herself surrounded by friends and acquaintances, all of them "dancing men," who begged an introduction to the proud-looking girl seated so calmly and quietly beside her.

"What did I tell you, my dear?" she whispered. "You have created quite a sensation! Is your programme full?"

"Not quite," said Floris, for she had scribbled some make-believe names in some of the spaces.

"Mine is!" said Lady Betty, gleefully, for the suitors for Floirs's hand could not do less than ask her chaperone for a dance.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE GLOW OF LOVE.

Floris danced one or two dances with strangers, then Bertie came up.

"I didn't like to seem too pressing, Miss Carlisle," he said, his blue eyes fixed on her wistfully, "but I hope you have saved me a waltz."

"Would you like to have this one?" said Floris.

His handsome face beamed.

"Really? How fortunate!" and he put his arm around her.

If there was one thing Bertie did better than another it was waltzing.

Dancing was with him, indeed, the poetry of motion.

Floris and he were nicely matched and made a splendid picture of youth and comeliness.

By the time they had taken a turn around the room, Bertie's heart was beating fast, and the blood coursing through the veins with the ecstatic delight of having her in his arms.

The band seemed to be a heavenly choir; he moved on clouds through joyous space; he was half intoxicated with passionate love and despairful longing.

"Shall we go on? Am I tiring you?" he asked presently, in an almost tremulous whisper.

"Oh, don't stop, please!" said Floris, all unconscious of the storm within his breast, of the mad longing that possessed him to whisper:

"I love you! Floris, I love you!"

"Have I got your step?" he asked, for the sake of saying something, for he knew that they were moving in perfect accord, like one person instead of two.

"Perfectly," she said. "How can you ask? It is a delicious waltz. One of Waldteufel's, isn't it?"

"Yes—I don't know," replied poor Bertie, wondering how she could talk thus easily and carelessly.

It came to an end at last, all too soon for him, and he stood, as the music died away, panting a little and very pale. He was thinking how he should be able to bear seeing her dancing with other men for the rest of the evening, after the few delicious moments that had passed. He would go away, go home and shut himself up and think of her.

Floris's voice roused him from his abstraction.

"Will you take me to see those palms, Lord Clifforde?" she said. "I have been longing to stand underneath them all day. How calm and solitary they look out there in the dimness! One can almost fancy that they have the scent of the desert in their leaves still."

Bertie got her cloak, and they made their way into the conservatory. Two or three people were standing about, but Bertie found a seat in a quiet nook underneath the palms, a nook shut out from the gay ballroom beyond, and almost hidden amid the huge fronds of a royal fern.

"This is delicious!" said Floris, leaning back and pulling the leaves softly across her hand. "If I were rich, I would have a very large conservatory, with nothing but palms and ferns in it, with just a trickling fountain or two, but no birds to disturb the solemn quiet; and I would not permit any one to speak above a whisper," and she laughed softly.

Bertie stood beside her, his blue eyes resting on her downcast face, with a passionate longing aching in them.

"If you were rich!" he said, scarcely above the whisper she had almost commanded. "Perhaps you will be some day."

She shook her head, smiling.

"I don't know that I care to be," she said, as if communing with herself. "Rich people seem to have a great deal of care and trouble, and are no happier than poor people. I suppose Sir Edward is very rich?"

"Yes," said Bertie. "Immensely so!"

"And he works as hard as a city clerk, or harder, I suppose, and is always tired and worried to death. What a puzzle life is!" and she sighed.

He drew a little nearer, the quiet of the place, her sweet voice were driving him to rashness.

"There is only one thing worth having in life," he said.

"What is that?" she asked, looking up with a smile, which died away as she saw the paleness of his face and the light in his eyes.

"Can you not guess?" he said half fearfully, and yet with intense earnestness. "Miss Carlisle, I know that you will think me mad. I expect that you will be offended and angry. But I must speak, even though by speaking I anger you past forgiveness."

Floris half rose, but sunk back again, and opened her lips, as if about to stop him; she did pronounce his name, but almost inaudibly.

It is a strange, mysterious sensation which a girl experiences the first time a man tells her that he loves her, and the quiet, hurried words had thrown a spell over her for the moment, rendering her powerless to move.

"Miss Carlisle!—Floris!—I love you!" he said, bending over her, his face white, his lips tremulous.

A swift tide of crimson flooded Floris's face and neck, then she, too, turned pale.

"Yes, I love you," he repeated. "I don't dare to ask you if—if you love me! I know that it is not possible. I know that I must seem like a stranger to you. But though you may have known me only a few days, I seem to have known and loved you for years. Floris, have pity on me! I love you with all my heart and soul—"

"No, no, Lord Clifforde—" she faltered, at last.

"Yes, it is true. I know what you think. That I am light and frivolous—that—that—I am only one of the butterflies in the world, of no use or value; but, Floris, if you will let me love you, if you will love me a little in return; if you will only try to love me, I will prove to you that I will be less unworthy of you—"

"Oh, hush!" she said, trembling, a great wave of tenderness and pity sweeping over her heart for the handsome, true hearted boy. "Don't say any more, Lord Clifforde. You—you—mistake! It is I who would be unworthy of you."

"Floris!" reproachfully, passionately.

"Yes, yes! Who am I that you should so humble yourself? Oh, do not say any more! I am sorry—very, very sorry!"

"Then—then—" he faltered, looking down at her.

"Indeed, I am very sorry!" she repeated; "but I did not know, indeed I did not!"

"No, or you would have treated me coldly and kept me away!" he said, sorrowfully.

Then, with a wild hope that was almost despair, he took her hand in his hot one and pressed it fiercely.

"Floris, is it, must it be 'No?' Will you not give me some little hope? I will be patient! I will not plague! You shall see how patient I can be—"

"Oh, hush! hush!" she said. "Do not say another word, Lord Clifforde. It must be 'No!' I—I cannot love you. I am very, very grateful for the honor you have done me, and I know how great an honor it is! I wish—yes, I will say it!—I wish that I could have answered differently, but I cannot."

She let her hand rest in his while she spoke, then she drew it gently away.

He let it go, slowly, reluctantly, and his lips parted with a long sigh, as if something had gone from his life; then with a brave effort he forced a smile.

"You have been very good to me, Miss Carlisle," he said, and his voice rang with the pain that tortured him. "You have been more patient than I deserve. I will say 'Good-bye,' now."

"There shall be no word of 'goodness' or 'patience' between us, Lord Clifforde," she said, "and if we cannot—if I cannot be to you all that you wish, at least we can be friends still."

Poor Bertie smiled sadly and shook his head.

"How little you understand!" he murmured. "I know what you think, Miss Carlisle. You have heard, you know, that I do not bear the highest character for wisdom, and you think that because my past has been frivolous and foolish, that I shall get over this and forget it. Ah, you do not understand how deeply I love you! All my life will be changed from this hour."

"Oh, Lord Cliffordе!"

"Yes, Floris; I shall not get over this so easily; I shall not try to forget it. If I cannot have your love, I can at least endeavor to be less unworthy of it. You ask me to remain your friend. Floris, all my life I shall think tenderly of you, and of myself as your lover. Do you think I could bear to see you day after day, knowing that there can be no hope for me; that I could endure to meet you as an ordinary friend when all the time my heart was burning in the desire to make you my wife? No! I must go away. Good-bye. Some day—who knows—I may be able to meet you without the pang of misery and disappointment which I feel now. Good-bye."

His voice, the boyish voice which only this morning had rung out merrily, the musical voice which to Floris's ears had always something of laughter in it, was very grave and sad and his eyes resting on her face were full of a great despair.

She put out her hand in silence, feeling that any word from her would be worse than useless.

He took her hand, held it for a moment, then raised it toward his lips.

"May I?" he asked, simply—too noble and chivalrous to snatch a kiss by stealth.

She did not speak, but her eyes, in which the tears were standing, answered for her.

Poor Bertie kissed her hand twice, then turned and hurried away.

Floris sat under the stately palms sad and troubled.

No girl who is worth anything refuses an offer from an honorable man without being sad and sorrowful, especially if she really likes the man, and only just stops short of loving him, and Floris really did like Bertie.

His merry, boyish laugh, his frank, brotherly way had been very pleasant to her; she only just discovered how pleasant now that she had lost them—perhaps forever.

Another girl might also have remembered and regretted that she had refused a viscount; but Floris gave no thought to Bertie's rank.

It was of himself she thought, as she sat with downcast face, and hands listlessly in her lap.

Why had she sent him away? Why had she not tried to love him? At any rate, why had she not asked for time?

She asked herself these questions, and did not dare to answer them.

There are times when we shrink from examining our own hearts, lest we should discover the truth, and Floris shrunk from examining hers, lest she should find an answer there which would fill her with shame and confusion.

With a sigh she rose, then suddenly remembering that she was alone, and that she could not very well enter the ball-room unattended, she resumed her seat, quite contented to remain in the quiet and cool for a time.

Presently the band, which had been playing a square dance, ceased, and the couples began to find their way into the conservatory.

Unwilling to be discovered Floris rose and retreated still further into the dim region of palms and ferns, and found another seat still more secluded than the last. It was so far removed from the ball-room, that but for the sound of voices, and reflection of the lights on the fountains, she might have fancied herself in the recesses of some tropical forest.

While she was sitting there, a gardener passed by, and half startled by the apparition of a beautiful lady in a white dress, touched his hat respectfully and apologetically, and turned off through a door partly concealed by creeping plants.

Floris was just thinking that if she chose she might remain undiscovered till the ball broke up, when she heard the rustle of a woman's dress, and a man's voice close behind her.

At the sound of the voice, Floris started. Although it had only uttered one word she recognized it.

It was Lord Norman! She looked around anxiously, and saw, through the fern leaves, Lord Norman and Lady Blanche sauntering down the narrow path.

Lady Blanche was magnificently dressed in an Indian silk of the thinnest fibre, and of the palest pink.

It was studded with pearls in the oriental fashion, and fitted her to perfection. Nestling in her golden hair were flowerets of diamonds, that sparkled and gleamed like fire-flies in the fitful light.

The beautiful face, usually so cold and impassive, wore a faint, soft smile, that played about the perfect lips and shone in the velvety eyes.

As they approached, Floris saw that she had clasped Lord Norman's arm, on which she leaned with her other hand, and that her face was turned up to his with a happy, child-like smile.

Then Floris looked at him. Surely there would be an answering smile on his face! No man could resist the entreaty in those dark, velvety eyes!

But there was no responsive happiness on his face; grave, almost grim, it seemed by contrast with her, and Floris saw that, though he was presumably listening to her, his attention was straying, and that he was thinking of something else than the beautiful woman clinging so lovingly, so appealingly, to his arm.

"I am so glad you have come, Bruce!" Floris heard her murmur. "You said you did not intend to, and I was looking forward to a blank evening."

"I changed my mind," he said, if not coldly, carelessly.

"That is a woman's privilege, and one they do not extend to men, Bruce," she retorted, with a smile that seemed significant to Floris.

"Oh, men have all your weaknesses as well as their own, Blanche," he said.

Floris looked around for some means of escape.

To be found by them, playing, as it would seem, at eavesdropping! The idea was terrible! But there was no exit save by a narrow path in which they stood, and hoping that they would turn back, Floris drew still closer into her leafy shelter and tried not to listen.

"Shall we sit down, Bruce?" asked Lady Blanche.

Floris's heart quaked.

"If you like," he assented. "But hadn't we better go back and dance this waltz? You won't care about missing it, you know."

"I don't mind in the least," she said. "If you would rather sit it out, let us do so. We can find a seat."

"The only legitimate excuse for a ball is dancing," he said. "We will go back."

Floris drew a breath of relief.

"Wait a moment or two, Bruce," said Lady Blanche. "I have something to tell you."

"Yes," he said, with a politeness that was worse than the most pointed indifference, and he looked down at her patiently.

Lady Blanche hung her head and pulled at the pearls on her fan.

"I don't know how to tell you, Bruce! And yet I must. You seem the only friend, the only one to whom I can come when I am in trouble. It seems so natural to think of you as a friend, and adviser, Bruce!" and she glanced up at him, with a soft, lingering sigh.

Floris, trying not to listen, heard every word, saw the upward glance, heard the tender, pleading little sigh, and appreciated them as only a woman could.

Surely not even Lord Norman could withstand them!

He was silent a moment, during which Floris, with an aching at her heart, expected to see him put his arm round the slim waist and draw the beautiful woman to him with murmured words of endearment. But instead, he said, with a half smile:

"What have you been doing, Blanche? Overdrawing your account? Laming my lord's favorite mare? Or what?"

"Ah, if it were only a little trouble like that, Bruce, I could laugh at it as easily as you do—"

"I wasn't laughing, Blanche."

"But—but this is a greater one. Bruce, I find it hard to tell you—"

"Don't, then; tell me to-morrow," he said, gravely, and almost, so Floris fancied, with an air of relief.

Lady Blanche sighed.

"No, I must tell you now, Bruce! To-morrow may be too late!" and she glanced up at him piteously. "Bruce, Lord Hawksley called this afternoon. I was out, here, at the fair, but he came to dinner and—he came to see me."

Her voice sank, and her hand closed nervously on his arm.

"Did he?" he remarked, carelessly. "What did the old antediluvian want?"

"Bruce!" in a low, thrilling tone. "He came to ask me to be his wife."

Lord Norman did not start, but he looked surprised and indignant.

"He did!"

Then he laughed, and at the laugh Lady Blanche's face went deadly white, as if he had struck her.

"Forgive me, Blanche. But Hawksley! Why, great heavens, he is as old as Methusaleh! Why, he was an old man when I was a boy! He must be eighty—more!"

"And you laugh!" murmured Lady Blanche between her closed lips.

"I beg your pardon! But could you help it? Hawksley! Why, he has more than one leg in the grave, and is as false as one of the models at Madam Tussaud's! His wig and teeth and enameled complexion used to be the joke when I first came to town. And he proposed to you! Of course you gave him a speedy answer, Blanche?"

She opened her fan and looked at it.

"No, Bruce. I—Lord Hawksley is an old friend of my father's."

"He might have been of your grandfather's," retorted Lord Norman.

"And—and—"

"He is the richest and best *parti* in London. I know all that, Blanche, but all the same, I don't suppose you said anything but 'No.'"

Floris could see that she was trying him; any one but a man would have understood the trap she was setting for him, but Lord Norman was a man and altogether unconscious.

Floris's heart beat fast. How would it end? Would the beautiful siren, with her pitiless tale, win the day?

"No, Bruce," she faltered. "Oh, don't be angry with me! You don't understand how we women are placed!"

"No, I don't," he retorted. "But I do understand that when a girl is asked by a man who is old enough to be her grandfather, to be his wife, that the sooner she sends him about his business the better."

"Ah, it is so easy for you to say that!" she murmured. "You are a man, and your own master! You can pick and choose where you will! But I am a woman, Bruce, and am not my own mistress. Bruce, my father really wishes me to marry!"

"But not Lord Hawksley?" he said.

She glanced up at him, and opened and shut her fan again.

"He is anxious that I should marry, Bruce, and Lord Hawksley is an old friend of his! And—and—there is no one else."

Now, thought Floris, he will take her in his arms and tell her that there is some one else, that there is Lord Norman!

But Lord Norman did nothing of the kind.

"That's nonsense, Blanche! There are a dozen some one elses! I could count up a dozen men who are head over heels, dying in love, and any one of whom would go half out of his mind with delight if you threw the handkerchief to them!"

She crimsoned, then turned pale.

"But—but, Bruce! I don't care for any one of them," she murmured.

"And certainly you don't care for old Hawksley!" he said, quickly. "So why choose him?"

"He is my father's choice, not mine!" she said turning her head away.

He stood silent and troubled. Should he hold out his hand and say:

"Blanche, here am I! Will you choose me?"

Why should he not? A few months—a few weeks—ago he was quite ready; was on the verge of doing so.

Why should he not now? She was supremely beautiful, of high rank—his equal—a peerless creature, fit to adorn a court!

Great heavens, what more, or higher, did he need to expect?

He asked himself the question, half angrily—impatient with himself—inwardly raging at his want of firmness, at his incapacity of forcing himself to do it.

Then, suppressing his angry air, he did turn to her and said:

"Blanche—"

But before he could get any further, before the glad, expectant light had scarcely time to come to her eyes, a voice—a clear, thin voice, the unmistakable treble of Lady Betty—chimed in between them.

"Floris! Floris, my dear: where are you?"

As if the name "Floris" had fallen from the lips of his guardian angel, Lord Norman stopped short, and, with a sudden start, turned toward her.

Floris saw him start, saw him turn pale. Was he angry with Lady Betty for interrupting them?

And what on earth should she, Floris, do! She could not possibly come out now. Inwardly chafing at her situation, she had borne it as best she could, and she must bear it a little longer.

"Bruce! Here you are! How do you do, my dear Blanche?"

The two women shook hands coldly, and if a glance from one woman's eyes should kill another, then Lady Blanche's would have slain Lady Betty on the spot.

"So provoking!" said Lady Betty. "I've lost Miss Carlisle! I've been looking for her everywhere. Of course, it doesn't matter—I mean I don't suppose she has disappeared for good, but all the men she has promised dances to are bothering me about her."

"I didn't know Miss Carlisle was here," said Lord Norman, and his voice seemed suddenly lightened.

Lady Blanche leaned upon his arm, with a silent, haughtily preoccupied air, as if the absolute murder of Miss Carlisle could not affect her.

"Oh, yes; she is here, and has made quite a success!" said Lady Betty, glancing with pretty spitefulness at Lady Blanche. "That is just it! Another girl would not be missed, but the men are plaguing my life out, and I must find her!"

"She can not be far off," he said, looking round.

Floris drew closer under her fern ambush.

"Where did you see her last, Betty?"

"She was dancing with Bertie, and I think they walked off in this direction. Good gracious! I never thought of that! You know how dreadfully reckless Bertie is! Do you think he can have persuaded her to—to go off with him anywhere?"

"Nonsense!" said Lord Bruce, almost fiercely. "Where can they go?"

"I don't know," replied Lady Betty, with characteristic vagueness. "He has certainly disappeared also!"

Lord Norman's face darkened.

"I think I should like to go into the room again, Bruce; this place strikes me rather chilly, does it not?" murmured Lady Blanche, with haughty languior.

He started.

"Eh? Oh, yes! Certainly. Look in the anterooms, Betty," he said, over his shoulder, as he led Lady Blanche away.

They had no sooner got clear away than Floris stepped from her nook so suddenly as to make Lady Betty jump.

"Good gracious, my dear! You nearly frightened me out of my life! In your white dress you looked like a ghost!"

"I might say like the burglar who was discovered underneath the bed by the lady; I don't see why I should frighten you, seeing that you have been looking for me so long!" said Floris, with a very quiet smile.

Lady Betty laughed.

"Now that is just like you! Instead of apologizing for all the trouble you have given me, you make me laugh!"

"I am very sorry," said Floris.

"So you might be, my dear. But what are you doing here? And where is Bertie?"

"I was resting," said Floris; "and it was so quiet and cool that I remained longer than I expected."

"And Bertie—he was with you, wasn't he?" asked Lady Betty.

"Yes, but Lord Clifforde left me some time ago," said Floris, struggling hard to keep the color from her face.

Lady Betty looked at her rather curiously.

"Ah, well, come back now, dear, will you? The men you have promised are going about in the most wretched state of mind—"

"I don't think I will dance again to-night, Lady Pendleton," said Floris, quietly. "I have rather a headache, and I would like to stay here—"

"But, gracious me, one doesn't come to a ball to sit in a conservatory!" exclaimed Lady Betty, remonstratingly.

"I have danced a great deal to-night. Please let me stay," she pleaded, feeling that she would do anything rather than whirl round the garish room after all that had happened between poor Bertie and her.

"Oh, very well, my dear. Well, stay here for half an hour, and then I'll come for you. You do look pale and tired, and it has been a hard day. It is beautifully quiet here, certainly. I'll come back in half an hour."

"Thank you," said Floris, gratefully, and she went back to her secluded corner.

There she sat for some moments, wondering whether Lady Blanche had gained her victory, or whether Lord Norman had not yet said the words which would make him hers.

And why, she asked herself, angrily, should she trouble herself about Lord Norman and Lady Blanche!

What could it possibly matter to her whether Lady Blanche won or lost him! With an impatient gesture she picked up her fan, resolved to go back into the ball-room and waltz Lord Norman out of her thoughts, when suddenly she heard his step—she knew it so well already—close beside her, and the next moment he put aside the fern leaves and was looking down at her.

There was a look of glad surprise in his face, a flash of light in his eyes, as they rested on hers, that went straight to Floris's heart, so that, instead of looking up at him with cold, haughty indifference, her eyes drooped with a strange heaviness, and flinched before him.

"At last!" he said, in a low voice. "Where have you been hiding? or rather, seeing that you are here, why have you been hiding, Miss Carlisle?"

"I have not been hiding," she answered, trying to speak coldly. "I have been resting here."

"I have been looking for you all over the place," he said, the happy lightness of his face contrasting strangely with the grimness of a few minutes ago.

"I am sorry. I will go back now," she said, rising.

"Oh! but is that fair?" he said, expostulatingly. "Just as I have found you, and in such a delicious little nook, you want to leave it. Please do not forget that though you are rested, I am not. You don't know how many miles I have walked in search of you!"

As he spoke she felt rather than saw the dark eyes traveling over her; felt rather than saw the intense admiration he bestowed upon her.

There is no reason why you should not remain, Lord Norman," she said, gathering up the trail of her dress; "I can find my way back alone."

"You shall not do that!" he said, with a sigh, "if you will go. But, will you not stay five—only five minutes longer? You looked quite contented, and as if you meant growing here, until I came up. I am afraid I disturbed you. Perhaps I had better go!" and he let the ferns fall from his hand.

Floris did not speak.

"Then I may stay?" he said, and taking her silence as an affirmative, he sat down on a clump of rustic work at her elbow, and looked down at her.

Floris's heart beat fast. She racked her brain for some commonplace remark to hide her confusion, and to make him think that his presence was of no consequence to her; but she could find nothing—nothing—to say.

He was silent for some minutes, then he looked round.

"What a delightful retreat you have discovered!" he said, slowly. "No wonder you were reluctant to leave it! And yet you have made a 'success,' as Lady Betty would say. Do you know that your absence is causing quite a commotion among the dancing men?"

Floris smiled.

"They can easily be consoled, my lord," she said. "But you remind me of my broken engagements; I will go and save some of them."

"Not yet," he said curtly. "My five minutes are not up yet. But I will release you, if you give me the next dance!"

"My card is full," she said, firmly.

"Then I will take the remainder of my time," he retorted.

There was silence for a moment, then, looking down on the ground, he said:

"I am glad that I have found you here; it gives me an opportunity of saying good-by!"

Floris started and looked up at him with a sudden glance of alarm; but he was staring moodily at the door and did not even see it.

"Yes, my lord?" she said, steeling herself to speak coldly.

"Yes, 'my lady,'" he responded, mocking her cold formality. "Yes, I am off to-morrow. I promised you that I would stay over this fair, and I have done so—"

"You promised Lady Pendleton," said Floris, quietly. He kicked at a broken leaf impatiently.

"I promised you; I stayed because you asked me," he said, emphatically; "and you know it."

Floris, trembling, picked up her fan.

He looked at his watch.

"I have just two minutes more, if you please!" he said, significantly.

"Are you going to be away long?" asked Floris, for the sake of saying something, and speaking as very indifferently as she could.

"I don't know. I dare say. Two or three years, perhaps!" gloomily.

Floris did not speak.

"Why should I come back?" he went on. "I am tired of London life—for the matter of that, I am tired of life altogether. It seems to me that the clever individual who wrote the book called 'Is Life Worth Living?' might have saved himself the trouble, seeing that everybody knows the answer! Life is only worth living when one can get what one wants, and as one never gets the one thing that one wants above all others, why the game is not worth the candle!"

"And yet you have so much," murmured Floris.

"Oh, yes. I know!" he said, bitterly. "I know what you would say; I am a peer of the realm; I am rich—thanks to a fluke of the law, which has enriched me at the expense of others."

Floris colored, and turned her head aside.

"I have heaps of friends, am my own master, and the rest of it! And yet I question whether there is a more miserable man in London than I am to-night, for I have set my heart upon a thing, and I cannot get it."

"I think the five minutes are up, my lord," said Floris.

He took no notice of her reminder, but sat staring at the ground.

"So, Miss Carlisle, I will say good-by. May I say that I hope I go carrying your good wishes with me? Don't speak for a minute, please!" as Floris was framing a commonplace on her lips. "I know that—that you dislike me! No, I will not say that! You are too good and gentle to dislike any one! I will not say dislike! But I cannot but feel that my presence is distasteful to you. How can it be otherwise, seeing that it reminds you of all you and yours have lost. Heaven knows that if you would accept it I would restore it all to you—every penny."

"My lord!" coldly, proudly, and yet with a tremor in her voice she tried hard to conceal.

"There! I beg your pardon! I know—I say I know it is not possible! Do you think I have not learned for myself how proud you are, even if you had not told me in so many written words!" and he touched his breast. "Yes, I keep your note still, to make me miserable when I am far away!" and he laughed bitterly.

Floris drew her cloak around her and turned her head from him.

"I shall often look at that note, Miss Carlisle. It will serve to remind me that life is not worth living. But, I beg your pardon, I am keeping you."

He got up, then, before she could move, he sat down again.

"Will you not say that you wish me well, Miss Carlisle?"

Floris opened her lips, but for a moment no sound came, then, at last, she murmured very softly:

"Yes! I wish you every happiness, my lord!"

"Thank you!" he replied. "But if it is any consolation to you, let me assure you that your wish is quite in vain. I am not happy, and I shall not be. Shall I tell you why?"

Floris was silent, and he did not speak for a minute.

"Yes, I will tell you!" he said, as if he had been debating in his mind whether he should do so or not. "Miss Carlisle, I am going to make you very angry. It is probable that when I have spoken, you will forbid me ever to speak to you again. I am a fool to speak! All day I have been telling myself that it would be better for me to take myself off in silence, but I cannot. I am like the man who stole a fox, and who concealed it under his vest, and was silent until the last moment. This is my last moment, and I must speak, though the words separate us forever."

He was silent while one could count ten, and Floris plucked up courage to smile quietly.

"Had you not better conceal your fox a little longer, my lord?"

"No!" he said. "This is what I have to say: "Miss Carlisle, I love you!"

CHAPTER X.

THE STRANGER'S TRAP.

As he spoke the momentous words, not falteringly, as did poor Bertie, but with a grim intensity, with brows knit, and lips set firmly, Floris's heart seemed to stop beating, then gave a great leap of wild joy, of ecstatic triumph, of the sublime satisfaction of one who has been long athirst, and feels the cup of life-saving water at her lips.

"I love you!" he said.

A deep crimson spread over Floris's face and neck, and her eyes, sunk, heavily weighted, while her hands closed on her fan with a spasmodic grasp; but she said no word.

She could not; if she had tried to speak, her lips would only have echoed that grim, emphatic avowal:

"I love you!"

"You are angry!" he said, in a very low voice. "I expected it. You think I have no right to tell you this after the unmistakable signs of aversion you have bestowed on me. I know it. I plead guilty. But I cannot help it. This is the last time we shall meet—you will be glad, I know. We have never met yet but I have offended you, and you have found it necessary to—yes, snub me! But this is the very last time, and—and—will you forgive me?"

She did not speak; she could not. He stooped and took up his opera hat, and looked from it to her as if hesitating whether to go or wait for a word.

"Will you not speak to me?" he said, gravely.

Still she was silent.

Then, as if his passion goaded him beyond prudence, he bent over her and laid his hand upon her arm, his strong fingers burning hot and seeming to brand her with their own passion.

"Floris! Have some pity! Speak to me kindly! One kind word! Your icy looks and proud words have cut me to the heart often enough, Heaven knows. Don't hurt me with them now, now that we are going to part!"

"Floris, I love you! I even loved you—think of it—before I saw you! Even before we met your pride and scorn whipped and tortured me! Unbend a little now, Floris. Send me away—as I know you will—but send me away with one kind word! Say 'Bruce, I do not like you; I have cause not to like you—or yours. Your name is hateful to me, and I am glad that you are going; but I am sorry that you love me, and—and if you had been another man—if you had borne another name, I might have loved you!'

"Will you say something like that, Floris? Don't let me take away with me for a last remembrance, to haunt me for months, a proud, angry face, a scornful retort. I love you, Floris! I shall love you, I am afraid, for a long time! Tell me that you are sorry for me, at least!"

Still she was silent, her averted face white and constrained; her pride doing battle with her love, and losing ground, inch by inch.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Before Heaven," he said, "I do not think there was ever a prouder woman or a better hater. Good-by, Floris! I wish that I could hate you as you evidently hate me!"

He turned as he spoke, then hesitated, went back, and took up the edge of her cloak, still warm from contact with her soft. white arm.

"Good-by," he said, and he bent and pressed the cloak to his lips, not reverently and fearfully, as poor Bertie bestowed his caress, but with a fierce, passionate wistfulness. "Good-by, my Lady Pride!"

As he bent, even as his lips touched the soft swan's-down, her hand went out, not swiftly, but hesitatingly, reluctantly, toward him.

He stopped, with fond, eager, hungry eyes.

"Well," he said, almost hoarsely.

"I am sorry," she said, using the very words she had used to poor Bertie, but how differently! Ah, how differently!

"Thanks," quietly.

"And—and—I wish you—" she stopped, her face quivering, her lips trembling, her eyes shrinking piteously before his passionately questioning gaze.

"You wish me every happiness? Thank you again," he said, with a sharp sigh. "And you forgive me? Is that what you are trying to say, and find it so hard? Thank you, still once more. Half a loaf is better than nothing. We part friends. Give me your hand, Floris; your left hand, that's nearest your heart."

She put out her hand and he took it and held it so tightly that it tingled with pain—pain that was an ecstasy to her; pain that she would not have exchanged for the greatest ease.

"There!" he said. "I am satisfied. Good-by!" and his fingers unclosed.

But hers did not. Trembling, quiveringly, they wound round his hand, and held it feebly as a child's, and yet as strong as a giant's.

He did not start; he uttered no wild exclamation of joy, or surprise, or delight, but he stood as if he had been shot, or turned to stone, looking at her averted face, now crimson with shame, as if he were dreaming.

Then he flung himself at her feet, and grasped her other hand, and drew her to him, looking up into her face with passionate eyes that swear to wrest the truth from her.

"Floris! What is this? What do you mean? For Heaven's sake, don't—don't play with me! Floris! You hold my hand! You do not speak—you do not send me away from you! Great Heavens, am I mad, or dreaming, or do you—Floris, do you love me?"

She turned her head, and looked down at him with the truth shining in the glorious eyes that were now soft and tremulous with love, ay, with passion, answering to his own.

With a low cry he kissed her hands, quickly, fiercely; but he was not satisfied yet.

"My darling! Floris! Speak to me! Tell me! I can't believe it until I hear your lips whisper it! Floris"—with a swift, awful doubt—"you are not playing with me?"

"No! I see you are not! Forgive me, darling, but the joy is so sudden, so unexpected! Floris, tell me! Say, 'Bruce, I do love you!'"

She bent her head, and looked at him, and whispered:

"Bruce, I do love you!"

He drew her face down to him and kissed her—hot, burning kisses, that made her blush and tremble.

"My darling! My beautiful queen! You love me!"

He got up, still holding her hand, and put his other hand to his forehead with a low laugh, almost of apology.

"And I have mocked at love!" he said, half to himself.

For a moment there was silence, as he sat in his old place, holding her hand, and looking at her as if his hungry eyes could find no appeasement, and she—she sat looking at nothing, yet seeing him as plainly as if her eyes were fixed on his face.

So wrapped were they, so lost to the outer world, that they did not see the glimmer of a soft, pink dress in the shrubs in front of them, did not hear the quick, sharp sob of a woman's voice, or feel the glare of a woman's eyes, that are not velvety now, but almost black with rage and jealousy.

"And you love me!" he said in an amazed whisper. "Why, Floris, it is almost past belief."

"Is it?" with a little, shy glance and a fleeting smile that made him long to catch her to his heart.

"Yes! I always thought you hated me!"

"Yes?"

"Yes! We never met but we quarreled. I never spoke a civil word to you but you froze me on the spot."

"Did I?" with a smile.

"That you did! There were times when after you had sent me away, with an icy glance or a word of contempt, that I felt too ashamed and humiliated to live! Why, what made you change so, Floris? Tell me; I am curious!"

"I have not changed!" with a stare of amazement and delight. "No!" shaking her head, and turning her eyes shamefacedly from his ardent gaze. "No, I have not changed. Will you not look away from me, Bruce? You fill me with shame—I loved you from the first."

"Great Heaven!" he murmured, in a rapture. "From the first! Not from the first, Floris?"

"Yes," she said, making her confession with averted eyes and burning cheeks; "I think I loved you the first night I saw you. You—you told me that you loved me, remember."

"Yes, I did! Not knowing you were you! But you—you were pride and scorn and *hauteur* combined."

She shook her head.

"Great Heaven, what actresses women are! And—and—all the time?"

"Yes," she admitted, and the admission was sweet. "All the time, Bruce, I fought against it. I told myself that I ought to hate you. I almost prayed that I might learn to do so. But it was no use."

He did not speak. His was a joy too deep for words.

"And when I felt it was of no use, why," with a sudden start, "I was like to die with shame when I remembered that perhaps you were already engaged, that—that Lady Blanche—"

He bit his lips, but his eyes met hers unflinchingly; the shrubs opposite them, behind which Lady Blanche stood, stirred and rustled as she pressed forward, straining her tortured ears to catch the response.

"Lady Blanche?" he said, gravely, almost coldly. "Yes, I know; Floris, you had nothing to fear; you were misled. There was never anything tangible between us. I never loved her, never could have loved her. And if at any time there had been anything in my heart to her warmer than friendship, it would have vanished at your presence, dearest."

Awful words for that stricken woman to hear!

No wonder she turned white to the lips and staggered back, grasping a tree to keep herself from falling.

No wonder that, possessed by the demon of jealousy, and the fire of unrequited love, she was compelled to press her hand to her lips till the teeth closed on them to prevent the cry of despair and anguish that rose from her heart.

"Oh, I am glad!" said Floris, with a little sigh. "I could not have shared your love. I could not have borne to think that I had only got it second-hand. You see," with a little, piteous smile that was very near tears, "I am so proud!"

He bent till his lips touched her beautiful hair.

"By Heavens, I think I love you all the more for being so!" he answered. "I would not have you altered by a hair'sbreadth, my darling. I think you perfect, bodily and mentally. Why, I dream even—don't laugh—of your very dresses. To-night you look like a vision of cold, pure ice, you see. Proud! So you shall be. Be as proud as you like, so that you are not too proud to let me love you. And, I, too; I am proud. But I am a bad lot altogether, my poor darling. Heaven grant I may be able to conceal it from you."

She smiled trustingly enough.

"I will take you as you are, Bruce," she murmured.

"I am proud, too, little one," he said, very thoughtfully, "and a monster of jealousy."

She laughed softly.

"Are you? How much alike we are! My pride is only outdone by my jealousy. I warn you, Bruce, I shall grudge every smile you bestow on other women. I shall want all your soft speeches."

He laughed grimly.

"I was never wont to smile much, or very rich in soft speeches, my darling; but what I have in stock shall be reserved for you. Ah, you know well how wholly and entirely I am yours, bound body and soul to your chariot wheel, so much your slave that there is not another woman in the world that is worth a thought to me!"

She put up her hand with a little, naive caress, and laid it against his cheek.

"Ah, how happy I am!" she murmured, so low, and yet so distinct that it reached the hidden woman opposite them, and went to her heart like the stab of a knife.

Then Floris started.

"We must go. Why, how late it must be!"

He laughed.

"It is not late. What does it matter? Who cares?"

"Oh, but I must, sir! Lady Pendleton, my mistress, has forgotten me, and I must find her."

He laughed with grim delight.

"Lady Betty, your mistress. Ha, ha! How surprised she will be, and yet, I don't know! I have caught her looking at me once or twice with that cock-sparrow expression in her eyes which makes her look so knowing. She will be delighted. Must we go? Let me put your cloak around you. Happy cloak! What a pretty one! What made you think of that dress, and its edging of swan's-down? My beautiful angel!" and he took her bodily and boldly in his arms.

"Oh, take care!" she murmured, blushing, and looking around fearfully. "Some one will see us."

"Who cares? And to think that only this morning you snubbed me. Actually refused to sell me the flower from your bosom."

She blushed.

"Do you care to have it now?" she asked, quietly.

"Care? Give me a chance of getting it," he retorted.

She took the crushed and withered red rose from within her dress and held it out to him.

Then as, with a cry of delight, he eagerly stretched out his hand, she whipped her's behind her.

"Give me something in exchange, Mr. Bruce."

He laughed, his short, curt laugh.

"Take all I have," he said, then he glanced down and about him. He wore no rings, no trinket he could despoil himself of.

"Give me that flower in your coat," said Floris.

"Ah, yes," he assented, entirely forgetful of the woman who only that morning made him promise to wear it, who pinned it in his coat with loving hands. "Here you are. Give me my rose," and he took it from her, and with all a boy's love and a man's passion, kissed it before he hid it in an inner pocket.

And so they passed out, arm in arm, heart to heart.

For a moment Lady Blanche stood leaning against the palm, her face white as death, her hands clinched at her side.

Death! She had died a thousand deaths in that last ten minutes.

Hope, joy, the future, all were dead, and from their ashes had sprung the demons of hate and jealousy.

Without a cry she sunk onto a seat, and sat staring in front of her with clasped hands.

And she had lost him. Lost the man she loved more than life. And she had so nearly won him: a week, a few days ago, he was almost hers.

The world had linked their names together. It wanted but the word to make him hers irrevocably.

And now she had lost him. And why? Because of this chit of a country girl, this girl with the round face and the gray eyes, this servant of Lady Betty's.

"Oh, Heaven, it was hard to bear! Hard, hard, hard!

And he had told this girl that he had never loved, never could love Blanche."

Ah, it was hard to bear, too hard! She could not.

"I will not," she murmured, huskily; "I will not. There must be some way of stopping him, of balking her. She has caught him with her doll's face, with her pretended modesty and shyness. He must be saved! He shall not marry her; I mean it! But how can I prevent it? How—how? Oh, if there was some one to help me, some one I could depend on!"

She looked around wildly. "I am only a woman, a wronged, insulted, helpless woman. If there were only some one who could help me!"

As if in answer to her prayer, a voice from behind her said, in a quiet, almost sarcastic tone:

"I will help you!"

Lady Blanche started, and turning her white face over her shoulder, she saw a man standing half-hidden behind the ferns.

"I will help you."

Lady Blanche started quickly, as if the words had sprung from the lips of the familiar demon, the demon jealousy, that at that moment was reigning paramount in her bosom.

She started even more violently as she looked at the man who had spoken, for it seemed as if the shadow of Lord Norman had sprung up beside her.

She even murmured his name.

"Bruce!"

The man smiled sardonically, and shook his head.

"No, my lady, I am not Lord Norman," he said, calmly, with an ease that was almost insolent.

Lady Blanche looked again at him. The likeness to Lord Norman was extraordinary; had this man been dressed in an evening suit, he might have walked into the ball-room and been mistaken by all but the closest observer for the earl.

"Did you speak to me?" she demanded, in the cold, hard voice which had struck a chill to many an inferior.

"I did, my lady; I heard your appeal for help, and—I answered it."

"Who are you?"

"I am a stranger to your ladyship, and my name would not enlighten you as to my identity. Just now, you called me by Lord Norman's name. Let me be known, for the present, as an individual who happens to bear a strong resemblance to his lordship. Your ladyship will be surprised to hear that I have been seeking for an opportunity to speak to you for some days past."

Lady Blanche was surprised, and for the life of her she could not keep her astonishment from showing itself in her face.

"I have watched, followed you night and day for days past, ever since I first saw you leaving the Duchess of Cliefenden's party a week ago. I, too, have been an eye-witness of the love-passage between Lord Norman and Miss Carlisle, and I am as desirous of spoiling his lordship's felicity as you can be."

"Why?" demanded Lady Blanche, her breath coming fast. The quiet, self-assured manner, the easy, self-reliant voice were telling upon her, impressing her strongly and strangely.

He smiled.

"To answer that question would be to go into too long a story for the place and time, my lady," he said. "Let it go, if you please, that I am willing to balk Lord Norman's happiness for reasons of my own. Listen to me, Lady Blanche. This young girl comes between you and the man you love. I offer to separate them—to remove the obstacle! Will you accept my offer?"

"You can not do it," she said in a low, quivering voice. "You do not know him."

"Do I not? I know him well enough to count upon him for his assistance," he said. "Yes or no, my lady. Put aside the reluctance you feel to accepting help of a stranger, who appears in this unexpected—romantic, if you will—fashion, and avail yourself of my services."

Lady Blanche was silent for a moment.

The music had ceased, the sound of laughter and many light-hearted voices came confusedly through the silence. She fancied she could hear Lord Bruce's deep voice, as he bent over Floris; fancied she could see her eyes alight with the new passion of love. Her heart beat wildly, her brain whirled; she put up her hand to her white brow, with a gesture of desperate resolve, and turned upon the man almost fiercely:

"Do what you promise, and claim what reward you will!" she breathed.

He let his arms fall to his side, as if he had anticipated the result, and his manner changed instantly from the cool impassibility it had hitherto displayed to an acute alertness.

"Your ladyship has decided wisely. As to reward—yes. I shall claim it when the time comes."

Lady Blanche made her way back to the ball-room, and found her father yawning himself awake in one of the anterooms. When she declared that she was ready to go, the poor old earl quite brightened up with gratitude.

"Really! and the ball half over! 'Pon my word, you are growing sensible, Blanche. Lor'! how I hate these affairs! If I had known what I should have to go through taking charge of you, Blanche, I should have married again; I should, indeed!"

"Perhaps it would have been better if you had," she murmured, sadly, as she sunk back into a corner of the carriage. Perhaps if her mother had lived, or some woman had taken her dead mother's place, she, Blanche, would not have fallen into the trap set for her by this stranger.

"Where is Bruce all the evening?" asked Lord Seymour, with an awful gape. "He hasn't been near me, and he usually comes and has a chat."

"I do not know. Do not speak to me of Bruce!" she said, bitterly.

The old man laughed.

"You and Bruce have quarreled again. Never mind, you will make it up to-morrow, as usual."

A bitter smile crossed her white face.

"Yes," she said, almost to herself; "we shall make it up again."

CHAPTER XI.

GLAD TIDINGS.

How time fled! Whether the band played square dances or round, whether she was on her head or heels for the remainder of that wonderful night, Floris did not know.

She only knew that Bruce, her sweetheart—how pretty a word it is, though fashion has decreed it out of date—was continually at her side, whispering passionate love in her ears, pressing her hand, even venturing to kiss her hair when he could do so unobserved.

He would have danced all the remaining dances with her, if she would have allowed him, setting at defiance the fury of her engaged parteners; but Floris insisted upon his going off and doing his duty elsewhere, and it was half with amusement, half delight, that she watched him going through the business of a waltz with some other young lady, with his eyes straying, wistfully, hungrily toward herself.

At last Lady Betty grew tired, not, however, before the ball was nearly over, and at the end of a waltz—during which Floris had been responding with "Yeses" and "noes" to her partner's observations, without knowing in the least what he was talking about—she found herself, touched upon the arm by Lady Betty's fan, all the worse for wear by this time.

"I think we'll go now, my dear," she said, then she looked at Floris's face, radiant—say rather, softly glowing—with happiness, with a stare of astonishment. "By the way, how many times have you danced with Lord Norman?"

A crimson flush flooded Floris's face and she bent down to arrange her cloak.

"Oh, not many, Lady Pendleton," she replied.

"Oh, not many!" echoed Lady Betty, with a laugh. "Why, I have seen you dancing with him four times! No wonder Blanche went so early."

A spasm of pain ran through Floris's heart, but she fought against it. What did it matter, this coupling of his name with Lady Blanche's, while she, Floris, was his chosen love, his future wife? All the same, Lady Betty's bantering speech hurt her.

At the moment, however, she heard a voice at her elbow that dispelled all pain.

"Here you are!" he said. "Going? So am I. Come on, Betty. Miss Carlisle, let me put that cloak closer around your neck," and his fingers strayed to her ear, and he pressed it caressingly.

"Look here, Betty, I'm fearfully hungry," he said, as they reached the hall, and footmen were calling for Lady Pendleton's carriage. "Too hungry for grilled bones, which is all I should get at the club. Let me come home with you?"

"Will you?" exclaimed Lady Betty, delightedly. "But I'm afraid there won't be much to eat, Bruce."

"I don't care! I'll take my chance. I am hungry enough to eat anything—Miss Carlisle even! and he pressed Floris's arm.

"That would be carrying your attentions a little too far, Bruce," said Lady Betty, mischievously, "Can you squeeze yourself in the brougham, do you think?"

"If I could unscrew my legs," he said, laughing. "I'll get up beside John," and he put them in and climbed on the box.

The supper was laid in a very few minutes in the breakfast-room, that being, as Lady Betty remarked, the coziest room in the house, and Lord Norman, with a lady on each arm, led them in.

"Edward has gone to bed!" cried Lady Betty. "His speech was a great success."

"Here's the premiership to him!" exclaimed Lord Norman, raising his champagne glass, his eyes alight with happiness as they rested on Floris's downcast face. "I wish everybody joy and success to-night," he added. "Betty, this is an admirable fowl; let me give you a wing: Flo—Miss Carlisle," with mock ceremony, "can I assist you to some more galantine? Betty, I think I shall stipulate for the future that you give us supper in this cozy little room after every outing."

"I shall be delighted, Bruce, if you will undertake to be always in this humor. What is the matter with you to-night? You are like a boy You remind me of Bertie. By the way, where did he vanish to? Bruce, do you think you really ought to have any more champagne?" with mock gravity.

"I don't know. I am not sure that I ought," he retorted. "Champagne to a man in my frame of mind, Betty, is like oil on fire."

"What is the matter with you?" demanded Lady Betty, staring at his handsome face, more joyous than she had seen it since he was a boy home for the holidays.

"Shall I tell you?" he said. "Shall I tell her, Miss Carlisle?" and he leaned across and smiled into Floris's eyes, which dropped instantly.

"Why do you ask her?" demanded Lady Betty. "How can it possibly concern her?"

He leaned back in his chair and laughed, not loudly, but with pure, unrestrained, mirthful happiness.

"No, of course not! How can I concern her; eh, Miss Carlisle?"

"I think I will go now," said Floris, rising.

He rose, too, and stood beside her, detaining her with a light yet firm grasp.

"Not yet, Floris."

"Floris!" exclaimed Lady Betty, startled.

"Yes, Floris!" he said; "no longer Miss Carlisle to me. Betty, Floris has promised to be my wife; that is what makes me in such good spirits to-night. My wife, do you hear?"

Lady Betty gasped and stared.

"Not a word of congratulation?" went on Lord Bruce, enjoying her amazement. "Can not you find a word, my dear Betty? Or, perhaps, you disapprove, I forgot that Miss Carlisle is under your charge. I ought to have asked your permission and your blessing. Pardon me. It is not too late. Floris, shall we kneel to her in orthodox fashion?" and he put his arm around her waist and drew her to him.

Lady Betty rose, pushing back her chair, and found her voice at last.

"Bruce, is this true?" she exclaimed, delightedly.

"Does it look like acting?" he demanded. "Floris, she can not believe it. She can not understand what I have done to deserve so much happiness."

"Really true!" repeated Lady Betty. "Oh, I am so glad! Oh, my dear, my dear!" and she drew Floris away from him and kissed her. "I don't know what I can say, I am so pleased! Oh!"—with a sudden alarm—"of course, you will want to leave me now, dear!"

Floris looked at her affectionately.

"Why should I? Perhaps you will want to send me away, though!"

Lady Betty kissed her again for an answer.

"I wish I could keep you always with me."

"Thank you, Betty. Thank you," exclaimed Lord Norman.

"Don't be foolish; I mean till you take her, sir! And"—with a sudden brightening—"why shouldn't I? Why shouldn't she stay with me? As—as my friend, I mean, dear. Of course, there must be no more of this 'companion' nonsense," and she flushed. "Fancy having the future Countess of Norman for a companion!"

"If I stay—if you will let me stay," said Floris, gently, "it shall be just as I am."

"Well, well; we'll argue it out when we are alone," said Lady Betty.

* * *

"That's a tolerably broad hint for me to take my departure," said Lord Norman. "May I just have a cigarette before I go?"

"Yes," said Lady Betty, "and Floris shall tell Edward when he complains of the smell who caused it. There, I am going now; good-night," and she left the two alone.

"I will not keep you to-night, my darling!" he murmured, holding her in his arms. "How happy you shall be if mortal man can make mortal woman happy! Good-night, Floris. Good-night, my future wife! Will you give me one kiss before I go?"

She hesitated a moment. Then, for the first time in her young life, she raised her lips and laid them on a man's.

Next morning Lord Norman called his man, and with his assistance got into his morning coat and hat, and walked down Eton square. It was nearly twelve o'clock, and he expected—perhaps he hoped—to be informed by the footman that Lady Blanche was not up yet.

But the man showed him into the drawing-room, and there Lord Norman waited, staring out of the window, at one moment thinking of Floris—of dear, sweet Floris!—and the next of the stately, beautiful creature to whom he was going to announce his passion for another woman.

The door opened and Lady Blanche entered.

"So early! How good of you, Bruce!" she murmured. "Have you come to breakfast? I have not had mine yet. Come with me," and she drew him gently toward her.

"No, no," he said, almost harshly in his embarrassment. "I have had my breakfast, Blanche. I am very sorry I am so early."

"It doesn't matter. You know I am glad to see you, however early or late you may be. And the ball—what did you think of it?" she said, in her soft, clear voice.

"Oh, very good, I suppose," he said, looking at the carpet. "But I mustn't keep you from your breakfast. I'm glad to find you none the worse for yesterday's work, Blanche."

It was cowardly to shirk his duty thus, he felt and told himself; but was this the time to tell her, before she had even had her breakfast?

"And is that all you have come for, Bruce?" she asked. "I thought you had come to tell me something important, perhaps."

"Blanche, you are right," he said. "I have come to tell you something. You—you and I have always been such close friends that I feel it almost a duty to acquaint you at once with anything that—that materially affects me. Hang it all, Blanche! I hate beating about the bush! Last night I—"

A footman knocked at the door, and brought in a letter on a salver.

Lady Blanche took it and opened the envelope There was only a slip of paper inside, and on the slip of paper was written these words:

"I am here. If you are still willing to accept my aid, you will do well to see me; if not, send word that I may go."

She crumpled the paper up in her small hand, and said to the footman, "Wait outside."

"Well, Bruce," she said, turning her face to him with a smile.

"Blanche, I have come to tell you that I have asked Miss Carlisle to be my wife."

She did not change color, as he had expected her at least to do; her eyes did not even shrink beneath his.

"Miss Carlisle?" she murmured—"Miss Carlisle? Ah, yes! I had forgotten—Lady Betty's companion."

"Yes, Lady Betty's companion," he said. "But, though Lady Betty's companion, a lady by birth and breeding. But that is nothing to do with it. What do you say, Blanche?"

"I am very glad, Bruce—very glad. Stop! may I send my message?"

"Yes, in Heaven's name," he said, impatiently.

She had taken the news as coolly and calmly as if he had announced that he had engaged a new valet.

She went to the door; the footman was standing in readiness.

"Ask the gentleman to wait, please," she said.

Then she came back, and laid her hand on Lord Norman's arm.

"Now, Bruce, I am prepared!" she said, and her eyes shone and glistened up at him in a way which he remembered years afterward, and remembered all too bitterly.

CHAPTER XII.

FOR FORTUNE AND REVENGE.

"Ask the gentleman to wait!" said Lady Blanche; then she came back and stood beside Lord Norman, looking up at him with a smile in her eyes, though her face was white and strained with the effort to appear calm and unmoved. "So you are engaged to Miss Carlisle, Bruce?" she repeated.

"Yes, Blanche," he said. "You will give me your congratulation?"

"Yes, Bruce, with all my heart," she murmured. "I wish you every happiness, and her, too!" and she smiled again, while her hand closed over Oscar Raymond's note tightly, fiercely.

The marriage will take place soon, I suppose, Bruce?" she said, quite calmly, almost sweetly.

He nodded.

"As soon as possible. It is early to think of it yet. We—we were only engaged last night."

"Really! Why, last night, at the ball, they were saying that Miss Carlisle would be Viscountess Clifforde, and all the while she had made up her mind to be Countess Norman!"

His brow gathered in a frown for a moment, then he laughed.

"Oh, Bertie flirts with any one, you know, and I dare say he made all the running he could with Floris."

"Poor Bertie! Let us hope it was no more than mere flirtation for him. Good-by, Bruce!" and she let her fingers slide coldly, icily, from his hand.

He got his hat and went down-stairs, conscious of a vague feeling of surprise and confusion. At the end of the hall he saw an old gentleman, with white hair and spectacles, and wearing a cloak that gave him the look of a musician or literary man rather out at elbows, standing regarding the weather glass. The old gentleman turned, and regarded Lord Norman with a bland, amiable smile, and Bruce, touching his hat, in courteous response, passed out.

"This way," said the footman, rather curtly, and the elderly man slowly followed him up the stairs, and was admitted to the drawing-room.

Lady Blanche was standing by the window, looking down at the street, and did not turn her head until the footman had closed the door, and when she did so she started with a gesture of astonishment.

Oscar Raymond took off his spectacles, and inclined his head, with a smile that was half amused, half sarcastic.

"I read the success of my disguise in your ladyship's face," he said, quietly.

"Is there any need of this masquerade, sir?" she said, almost contemptuously.

"Judge for yourself," he retorted. "I have just met Lord Norman in your hall. He and I were once friends, and are now bitter foes. If he had recognized me he would have returned to warn you against me, and our plot would have been rendered abortive."

"Our plot!" she said, coldly. "I have not consented yet to join you in any plot, sir."

He raised his eyebrows, and pointed to the note, which she still held tight in her hand.

"Then why did you answer my note, Lady Blanche?" he said, significantly.

Lady Blanche was silent for a moment, then she said in a low voice:

"Last night you said that you intended to—that you were able to separate Lord Norman and Miss Carlisle."

"I did. That is still my intention," he said.

"What is your plan?" she condescended to ask.

"At present it is not complete," he answered. "It is an unwise general who discloses an immature plan of his campaign."

"How, then, am I to help you?"

"In two ways: for the present you must keep me apprised of all that happens to Lord Bruce, and you must afford me the opportunity of striking the blow when the occasion offers. I shall need another accomplice, Lady Blanche."

"Another?"

"Yes," he said, coolly, "and I think I have found her. Lady Pendleton has a maid, a Frenchwoman, a dark girl with black hair—"

"Yes, I have seen her."

"Her name is Josine. She is vain, and—well, like her race generally—passionate and impulsive, and she detests Miss Carlisle. Josine, with whom I mean to be very great friends, will keep me acquainted with Miss Carlisle's movements, and will assist me to strike my blow as the hour presents itself. My plan is more than half formed already, and when it is complete, your ladyship shall hear it, and judge for yourself whether it is not sufficient for our—I beg your pardon—my purpose."

"I am compelled to trust you, Mr. Raymond," she said, in a low voice.

"You will not find your confidence abused, Lady Blanche," he said. "One thing more. Will you please regard me as Signor Paulo, your Italian master—or, stay—music would be better, and more convenient. Would it not be as well if your ladyship took your finishing lessons from an experienced master?"

As he spoke he went to the grand piano, inclined his head by way of asking permission, and seating himself, began to play.

Lady Blanche stood watching him with a fascinated interest and curiosity. He played with all the ease and polish of a skilled musician, his long, thin fingers running over the keys with the rapidity of lightning one moment, and then gliding, with a soft touch, into a sweet serenade.

"Where did you learn to play like that?" she asked.

"Oh, I have picked up most accomplishments, Lady Blanche, and yet you see with them all I am but a needy adventurer."

"I will accept you as my music teacher, Signor Paulo," she said, quietly. "It is usual, I think, always to pay the fee in advance?"

"As your ladyship pleases. Yes, it is usual."

"Wait," she said, and glided silently from the room.

Oscar Raymond gracefully opened the door, and bowed her out, then he closed it, and walked up to the mirror, laughing silently.

"My dear fellow," he murmured to the reflection, "you are in luck at last! Yes, the tide has turned; the corner of the dark lane where you have been tramping so long is rounded at last. Revenge and a fortune at one stroke! It is not every man who could achieve so much; but then it is not every man who has your undoubted talents. My Lord Norman, you called me a cheat and kicked me like a whipped hound from your presence, and I threatened to cry quits with you! We shall see if I am not as good as my word! Signor

Paulo, I salute you!" and he bowed with mock gravity to the mirror.

The door opened and Lady Blanche entered. As he turned, she laid a bank-note on the table and pointed to it.

"Take it," she said, in a low voice. "When you need more—"

"I shall not hesitate to ask for it, my lady. Our interests are mutual. No war—even such a little comedy of an affair as this—can be carried on without money."

He took up the note. It was one for fifty pounds, and his eyes glistened.

"Josine must have a large slice of this," he said, musingly. "Good-day, Lady Blanche. You will find that your confidence in me has not been misplaced."

That evening Josine, having received permission to visit "an aged grandmother who was sick," went to spend an hour or two with her friend, the landlady of the "Three Pigeons." She passed through the public or coffee-room with her usual noiseless, quick step, very much like the tread of a self-possessed cat, and entered the little parlor at the further end.

As she did so she shot a glance toward the compartment nearest the parlor, and a faint smile of satisfaction gleamed in her black eyes as she saw an old, white-haired gentleman, with spectacles, seated at a table, diligently perusing a Parisian newspaper.

He looked up as she passed, and raised his hat, sweeping it earthward in the French fashion; and Josine just inclined her head; but, to make up for this curt acknowledgment of his courteous salute, she made a sharp, swift gesture with her long, thin, supple hand.

His quick eyes caught it, and he nodded as he resumed his paper; but after a few minutes he laid it down, and with a slow and listless manner he entered the little parlor in which sat Josine and the landlady, the latter of whom greeted him with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders, as if she were greeting an eccentric but harmless old man with whom it was pleasant to have a chat.

The old gentleman sat down and began to talk about the latest foreign news, speaking in French, Josine listening in silence, the landlady uttering the usual ejaculation. Presently she rose to attend to some customers, and the old gentleman dropped the news of the day abruptly and leaned over to Josine.

"Well, mademoiselle?" he said.

"Speak in English," said Josine. "There is not one, or few, who understand it."

"True. You are alway discreet," he said, with a beautiful French accent. "Have you what I want?"

Josine regarded him with a cunning look in her black eyes, then her head drooped on one side, musingly.

"Have I got what you want? I don't know. Last time we met, you asked me to procure some specimens of handwritings."

"And have you got them?" he said.

"And I have got them," she assented.

"Ah, thanks. A million thanks!" he murmured, holding out his hand.

"Wait a minute," she said, with a short nod, "you have not got them yet!"

He looked at her for a moment, then he took some sovereigns from his pocket, counted out ten and laid them on the table, covering them with his hand.

"See!" he said, with a smile. "Exchange is a practice of all races. Give me the letters—I will not say letters, any scrap of paper bearing the handwritings of Lady Pendleton and Miss Carlisle, the two friends I have heard you mention—and this little bagatelle is yours."

"Put five more sovereigns, monsieur, and they are yours," she said.

He added them slowly, and lifted his hand.

Josine pushed the letters across to him with one set of fingers, and clutched the money with the other. He laughed softly at her eagerness, and unfolded the papers. There were three: a scrap of memorandum written by Lady Pendleton, a short note from Lord Norman, containing a few lines accepting an invitation, and a copy of some song verses in Floris's handwriting.

He glanced at them with a face from which every trace of expression had vanished, then he put them in his pocket and nodded.

"Thanks. I am now satisfied. I shall study these specimens and make my notes—"

He stopped, for a broad grin spread itself over Josine's face.

"Oh, do not trouble to play the comedy out, monsieur!" she said. "It is of no consequence to me what you want them for. You have them; I have the good money. We are quits—for the present. For the present! Shall I be too rash if I prophesy that it will not be long before monsieur requires my assistance again?"

He looked at her, then he got up and stood silent and smiling.

"Mademoisellle is observant," he said with a bow. "Yes, it may be; and if I should, mademoiselle will give me her valuable aid?"

"No," said Josine, showing all her teeth. "I will sell it to you, though."

"Ah, but that is the same," he said, and with a sweep of his hat, he stole out.

Josine sat and watched him for a moment, then her eyes gleamed.

"Observant! One need not be so exceedingly observant to remark that for an old man, so very white-headed an old man, monsieur has very bright eyes, and hands—bah! hands white and smooth as a man's of five-and-twenty!"

CHAPTER XIII.

"COURTING TIME."

THE Lynches of Ballyfloe were extremely popular people. Sir Joseph had started in life as an errand boy in a merchant's office; had, by the usual process, developed into a full-blown merchant himself, and, by a happy venture in jute or cotton—some said tallow—had succeeded in making a pile which rumor put at a round million.

Ballyfloe was one of the finest estates in Scotland. The house was a magnificent one, built by a great Scotch lord, and so added to and improved by Sir Joseph that it had become a palace. In addition to a deer forest and trout streams, the Lynches had a wonderful French cook, and a famous library of books and gallery of pictures, so that the net was constructed to catch and hold all sorts of fish; and no one considered himself happy unless he could look forward to a fortnight in the autumn at Ballyfloe.

This particular party had been organized to meet Lord Bruce, who was a special favorite with Sir Joseph, and comprised some of the best known of the best set—lords and ladies, painters and poets—and the arrival of Lord Bruce's betrothed was looked forward to with the keenest interest..

Bruce, of course, traveled down with them, and after a journey which Floris thought so short as to seem one of a few miles only, they reached the nearest station to Ballyfloe. Here they found a magnificently-appointed carriage with an outrider, and a *fourgon* for the luggage.

After a short drive they arrived at the house. The carriage door was thrown open, and down the lane of servants Sir Joseph marched himself to hand the ladies out.

"I am very delighted to see you," he said, with a stiff bow, and a pleasant smile on his simple yet shrewd face. "Lord Norman, I hope the ladies are not tired out! Lady Pendleton, it was extremely kind of you to honor me. My wife is very anxious to see you, Miss Carlisle," and with a lady on each side of him, the man who had commenced life by lighting an office fire and dusting desks, led them into the magnificent hall.

Here they were met by Lady Lynch, a pleasant little body, who seemed as homely amid her grand surroundings as if she were in a suburban semi-detached villa.

"And this is Miss Carlisle?" she said, looking up at Floris as she held her hand. "My dear, I am very glad to see you. Lord Bruce is a very old friend of my husband's and of mine. I don't think there is any one my husband thinks so highly of, or looks up to more than his lordship, and I hope you will like us. We will do all we can to make your stay with us pleasant to you—oh, yes, for our own sakes—so that we may induce you to come again."

Floris's eyes filled, and she pressed the large hand, which was as soft as its owner's heart.

"I am sure I shall be very happy, Lady Lynch," she said, "and I am very glad to come."

"Thank you, my dear! And now you shall go to your rooms."

From hall to hall and corridor to corridor they were led with almost royal state to their apartments—apartments such as Floris had never even imagined—and were told that they had an hour in which to prepare for dinner.

In the drawing-room Floris and Lady Betty were soon surrounded: it was generally understood that Floris was to be the lady to be specially honored this autumn at Ballyfloe, and the worldlings were eager to pay their homage.

Another girl might have been rendered vain, might have been in danger of having her head turned, by the attention and adulation lavished upon her; but, as usual, Floris received and often parried it with her simple, unassuming modesty.

Presently, from the other end of the room, entered Lady Blanche.

She was splendidly dressed, as usual—with greater care, perhaps, than usual—and as she glided toward them, many a glance of admiration was directed toward her.

With a sweet smile, that was almost child-like in its gladness, she came up to the group and kissed Floris.

"I am so glad you have come!" she murmured. "We have all been expecting you so eagerly."

It was not until the dinner—a grander banquet than any that in all past ages had merited the name—had commenced, that Floris noticed that Lady Blanche was not looking so well as when she had seen her for the first time in her box at the opera.

There was a look of thoughtfulness almost amounting to care in the eyes, and a strange, proud smile on the lips that Floris had thought incapable of expressing aught but complete and perfect repose.

Once during the dinner, as she was listening to Lord Norman, who was talking to Lady Glenloona, Floris looked up and caught Lady Blanche's eyes fixed on her face with a curious expresison.

It was not one of dislike exactly, but rather one of close watchfulness. Of course, it instantly changed to a smile, but that the look had actually shone in her dark eyes Floris felt assured.

Some one else noticed it also, for as the ladies trooped off to the drawing-room, Floris felt Lady Betty's fan on her arm, and heard her whisper:

"How strange she looked to-night—Blanche, I mean!"

"Strange?" said Floris.

"Yes," said Lady Betty, pulling her down to an ottoman. "I have never seen her look like that. Do you know I'm afraid Blanche is up to mischief!"

"Aren't you inclined to be unjust to Lady Blanche?" Floris said, gently. "You don't like her, you know—"

"No, I don't. We never could get on," assented Lady Betty, "and I am always suspicious of her; but I dare say I am unjust—oh, I've no doubt I am! After all, what mischief can she do?" and she looked at Floris, thoughtfully.

Floris shook her head.

"What indeed!" she said, laughing. "One would think, hearing us talk, that she was a naughty school-girl in perpetual danger of playing some trick or other."

"Hem!" said Lady Betty. "Hush! here she comes," and she got up to make room for Lady Blanche.

If there had been any malice in the glance which Floris had met across the dinner table, her manner atoned for it now, if it did not entirely wipe out all remembrance of it.

Under the influence of the rare smile and the soft, dulcet voice, Floris found herself lulled into a belief that the beautiful creature could not possibly be guilty of anything approaching deceit, and she was in that state of mind when the door opened and the gentlemen entered.

She saw Lord Norman look around and discover her, and then come across the room with the directness of, and the speed of, an arrow from a bow.

"Well?" he said. "You two talking scandal?"

"We have been having a charming chat," said Lady Blanche; "so nice and absorbing that we had quite forgotten you."

"All right," he said; "then I'll go away again."

"No, you need not do that," she said; "you can sit down and talk to Floris. I am going to play," and with a slow, graceful ease she glided to the piano and commenced playing.

"It is awfully warm," he said. "Let us go into the conservatory; we can hear Blanche's waltz just as well there. What a crowd it is! People come and go here as if it were open house for all the world."

He drew her arm through his, and they made their way into the large glass house, which ran the whole length of one end of the room.

There, leaning against a marble statue of Venus, he stood and looked down at her, talking to her in that softened voice which is the best medium for love's confidences; and Floris, with half-closed eyes, sat and listened, forgetful of the world outside, even of the little world so near them.

Suddenly, while she was sitting there, she heard a strange sound behind her, the sound as of some one trying to open a window.

For a moment or two she paid no attention to it, and it was Lord Norman who remarked it.

"There is an awful draught all of a sudden," he said. "Some one has opened a window."

And he turned and walked some steps behind her.

Floris heard him speak, and looking around saw, to her amazement, the thin figure of Josine standing close up against the glass wall.

She was very pale, and her black eyes shone with a half-frightened, half-defiant glare for a moment, then drooped, as she made a respectful courtesy.

"What are you doing here?" asked Lord Norman, quietly.

"Pardon, milord," said Josine, glibly; "I have lost my way."

"Lost your way!" he said, in his grave, clear voice. "Where were you going, then?"

The question was so sudden that for a moment Josine was nonplused. She had expected Lord Norman would point to an open door in silence.

"To miladi's room, milord," she replied.

Lord Norman looked at her keenly.

"To the upper corridor! What are you doing here then?" he demanded.

Josine had gathered her wits by this time, and raised her eyes with a deprecatory glance.

"Pardon, milord. I had a letter for her ladyship, and hoped to get an opportunity of delivering it. Milord, a thousand pardons! I have dropped it!"

Lord Norman looked at her sternly in silence.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, under her breath, her eyes roving the floor. "It is certain that I have dropped it."

"You had better go and find it," he said, pointing to the open door behind her. "Go through that door and you will find yourself in one of the passages to the hall; there are servants there who will direct you, as you know, and might have remembered! Do not, please, enter this part of the house unless you are requested to do so!"

"Yes, milord; certainly," she murmured, and with a drooping head and gait, eloquent of the deepest contrition and humility, she passed out.

They waited a little while longer, then Floris got up.

"Let us go in now," she said, falteringly; and she drew away from him to the drawing room.

As she did so she saw something white lying on the ground at her feet, and pointed to it with her fan.

"What is that, Bruce?" she asked.

He stooped down and picked it up.

"It's a letter," he said, carrying it to the light, "and addressed to—"

"Lady Betty," she broke in. "Bruce, admit that you have done poor Josine an injustice."

He held the note up with the direction toward him.

"Admit that in your mind you have done me an injustice, if you please!" he retorted, smiling. "This letter is addressed to the Lady Blanche Seymour!"

"To Lady Blanche Seymour!" echoed Floris. "What a strange coincidence that Josine should lose a letter for Lady Betty, and that you should find one on the spot addressed to Lady Blanche!"

"Isn't it?" he assented; then he looked at the address thoughtfully. "Strange!" he said. "The handwriting seems familiar to me, and yet I cannot remember whose it is."

Floris went and looked over his arm at the envelope.

"Why, it has not come through the post, Bruce," she said, then she laughed. "How dreadfully curious we are! It is awfully bad manners to examine another person's letters so minutely. Pray take it to her at once."

He put the letter in his pocket, still thoughtful.

"No, I can't remember; and yet the writing is as familiar to me as my own. Floris," suddenly, "do you think it was this note that girl had lost?"

"No; she said distinctly that it was for Lady Betty."

He shook his head.

"I mistrust that girl. Let us take it to Blanche."

A great German maestro was playing on the grand piano, a buzz of conversation filled the room, and at the further end, surrounded by several men, they saw Lady Blanche.

She was sitting in a deep, high-backed chair, leaning indolently back, her fan moving to and fro listlessly, and her eyes fixed on vacancy.

She might have been listening to the music, or to the man who was talking to her, or lost in her own thoughts; to Floris's mind she made a splendid picture of beauty conscious of its power, and Floris stopped Lord Norman by pressing his arm.

"How beautiful she is, Bruce!" she whispered.

"Eh? Oh! Blanche?—yes!"

"Very beautiful, I mean!" she said, with emphasis. "I think her the loveliest woman I have ever seen—no, no! you must not indulge in such silly flattery!" for he had whispered a word or two of a beauty that was sweeter to him than Lady Blanche's. "See how they hang upon her for a word or a smile. If she were a queen she could not be more courted. If I were a man I should not be able to resist her."

He laughed softly.

He was so happy, so free from care, so entirely wrapped up in his passionate devotion to the beautiful girl on his arm, that he could afford to laugh at his fancy for Lady Blanche as a midsummer madness past and gone.

"Let us give her her note," he said.

They went up to the little group, and Lady Blanche raised her eyes and smiled up at them, a half sleepy smile, such as Cleopatra might have worn as she lay on board her yacht surrounded by her slaves.

"I've something for you, Blanche," said Lord Norman.

"Yes?" opening her eyes wide and holding out her hand.

The little crowd looked on for a moment, then man by man cleared away, and the three were left together.

"What is it? I am continually dropping my bracelets and things. Give it to me, Bruce."

"It is not a bracelet, Blanche," he said, and he held out the letter.

She took it, glanced at it, shook her head.

"Who is it from? How did you come by it?"

Bruce pressed Floris's hand to prevent her speaking, and she stood silently looking down, while Lady Blanche held the letter daintily between her finger and thumb.

"How can I tell? Open it and see."

"May I?" with a glance at Floris.

"Yes, we are all curiosity," he said, smiling.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Will you promise to pay it for me if it should be a bill? Will you—" She stopped suddenly, and the blood rose to her pale face, dying it a deep crimson, then left it paler than before.

Floris was astonished. Lord Bruce looked grave.

"Is it bad news, Blanche?" he asked.

She looked up at him steadily.

"Bad news? No! Why should you think that?" she asked, laughing softly. "It is a bill, and so exorbitant a one that it made me feel quite angry. I wish you had promised to pay it," and she let the paper fall into her lap, but so 'carefully careless' that the blank side fell upward.

At that moment, with a final crash, the great maestro's performance came to an end; a murmur of applause broke out; there was a general movement—people always move about at the end of a piece of music or song, as if they had been listening patiently, instead of talking loudly as they invariably do—and some one spoke to Lord Norman, and drew his attention away from Lady Blanche.

When he looked around, a minute or two later, she had gone, and she did not appear again that evening.

In the privacy of her own room, having locked the door, she took out the paper and read it again, and as she did so her lips grew pale and hard, and her brows knitted with the look of care and anxiety which Lady Betty had noticed.

"Will you meet me in the plantation by the bridge to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock?" ran the note.

There was no signature, but though Lord Norman had forgotten the handwriting, Lady Blanche had not. It was Oscar Raymond's.

With an inarticulate cry she drew herself to her full height, crushing the paper in her hand, almost as if the writer were before her, and she could crush him with her scorn, and contempt, and defiance.

"He writes—he orders me—as if I were his slave!" she muttered, fiercely, between her teeth. "Oh, fool—fool that I was, ever to have listened to him! And yet—and yet—if it can be done! Oh, how I hate her! If it can be done! If he can tear them asunder, I do not mind this humiliation, this disgrace! Her happiness mocks and maddens me! And it is for Bruce's sake, not for mine alone! He would tire of her in a month, while I—I know that I would keep his love for my life! Oh, love, love! to what depths am I dragged for your dear sake!"

The "plantation" was not a recent addition to the estate, for the firs had been planted three generations back, and were grown high and large enough to form a little wood that served as a cover for the game and made a pretty point in view from the house.

Lady Blanche knew the spot well, and knew, too, why Oscar Raymond had chosen it.

From that point of the plantation which he had chosen, the whole of the road could be seen, and no one could come upon them unawares—at any rate, from the house.

Sir Joseph had formed a riding party for that morning, and Lady Blanche had promised to join it, but she sent down a message by her maid that she had a headache, and did not appear in the breakfast-room, in which breakfast was kept going from nine till noon, and which presented the appearance of a London restaurant from the number of people who dropped in at all times between those hours, and the continued moving to and fro of the servants.

At ten o'clock the riding party started, and Lady Blanche, having made inquiries, learned that Lord Norman had gone with it, but that Miss Carlisle had remained in the house with Lady Betty.

To know that they were separated for a few hours, brought a strange, unreasoning feeling of relief, and almost accepting the fact as an omen of success, she dressed and telling her maid that she was going to walk her headache off, made her way to the plantation.

She reached the bridge as the clock struck eleven, waited there for some minutes, then slowly strolled into the dense shade of the pines.

She had brought a book as an excuse for loitering, and with it open in her hand she sat down on a fallen tree and waited.

There was no sign of Oscar Raymond, and she had seen no one since she started, excepting an old laborer in a rough frieze coat, whom she had found busily engaged picking up sticks at the fringe of the plantation, and with a sigh of relief, as the clock chimed the half hour, she rose and closed her book intending to go home, when the old man in the frieze coat hobbled toward her, passed her a few steps, paused to gather some sticks and cones, and then hobbled back again, and stood beside her looking up at her, with his hat in his hand and his reddish-gray locks streaming down his neck.

Lady Blanche had taken out her purse, when the old man put his hat on again and laughed.

At the sound of the laugh—the low, soft, mocking laugh—Lady Blanche started and turned crimson.

"Is it you?" she said.

"Yes," said Raymond, "and if your ladyship does not recognize me, I need not fear detection by any others here," and he peered up at her from his half-closed eyes with a furtive smile.

"Why are you here? Was it necessary?" she asked, coldly.

"Quite," he said, "or depend upon it I should not have taken the journey. Things are working well for us, my lady. There could be no better scene for our little comedy than this. You will understand that when I unfold my plot."

"Your plot? Then you are ready—"

"To strike!" he said, quietly, and with the smile of conscious power which had never failed to impress Lady Blanche. "But we had better come into the middle of the wood, my lady," and he hobbled in front of her.

Lady Blanche followed him until they had got well out of sight of the road, then he stopped, and, courteously motioning her to a bank, drew himself up to his full height and leaned against a tree.

"We need to be cautious, my lady," he said. "Last night my messenger was discovered by Lord Norman. He was supicious—and no wonder. Your French women are bad tools; they are always so curious on their own account. That is Josine's only fault."

"It was Josine, then, who brought me this note?" she said, coldly.

"It was Josine who should have brought it, but she dropped it, and it was brought to you by Lord Norman," he answered. "A dangerous episode, my lady! Her stupidity might have ruined us, and that would have been provoking, just as our plans are complete."

"Complete?" she repeated. turning very pale.

"Yes," he said, with a smile, and with a look of confidence that shone through the painted wrinkles on his face. "Yes my little comedy is now ready for the stage, my little plot is prepared, and given a fair opportunity—which we must make—and average luck, I shall have my revenge, and you—well, you will have had your amusement!"

"Tell me!" she said, impatiently.

"With pleasure," he answered. "Lady Blanche, before the week is out, Lord Norman and the young lady who stands between you—pardon! the young lady he loves—will be parted, and I shall come to you to claim my reward!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A DIABOLICAL PLOT.

Lady Blanche drew a long breath and looked at Raymond.

The dark, piercing eyes met hers with a faint smile of confidence, a forecast of triumph in them that contrasted very strongly with the disguise of age and poverty.

"Your ladyship would like to know how I am going to bring this much-to-be-desired result about. I will tell you. Will you not sit down? We are quite out of sight from the road."

Lady Blanche sunk on to a fallen tree, and Oscar Raymond—with the broken sticks he had gathered at his feet, ready to his hand if he should find it necessary to resume his assumed character—leaned against a tree beside her.

"This is my little plot, Lady Blanche," he said. "Pardon me if, during the recital, I exhibit any signs of pride. They say that the serpent in the Garden of Eden was rather conceited with the little plot of the apple, whereby he caught Eve; and a little self-glorification must be permitted me."

Lady Blanche made a gesture of impatience, and lowering his voice—bending down as he approached the most critical parts of the recital—he unfolded his scheme for the destruction of Lord Norman's and Floris's happiness.

Lady Blanche listened, and her face grew paler and paler.

A faint shudder ran through her as he proceeded, and when he had finished, when the insidious voice had whispered its last word, as he closed with a low, sardonic laugh of satisfaction, she drew a little away from him, shuddering palpably.

"Ingenious, is it not, my lady?" he said, with a sinister smile.

"It is diabolical!" fell from her pale lips.

"Oh, you flatter me!" he retorted.

"Diabolical!" she repeated.

But she did not get up and leave him; she sat, her fingers intwined together, her brows knit, pondering in silence for a moment or two, while he watched her.

"If—it should fail," she said, in a hushed whisper, "it will cover me with shame! I shall never be able to hold up my head again—I should die!" clinching her hands.

"Oh, it will not fail!" he said, confidently; "it is too good a plot to fail. It is just a little comedy that requires nice, careful, artistic acting; and I think I can manage my part. As to your ladyship, I have no misgivings respecting you; it is just the part you can play, if I mistake not, to perfection."

Lady Blanche's face grew crimson for a moment—crimson with shame—then the color died away, leaving her pale as marble.

"There is Josine," she said, after a moment's thought, "can you rely on her? Persons of her class are not always to be trusted. You have bought her, no doubt, but she may betray us for gold as readily as she consented to betray—them."

He laughed.

No doubt. But I hold Josine in a stronger chain than that of gold; my lady—I hold her by fear. Josine, in a weak moment, was foolish enough to steal some letters of her mistress, and I have them. If I am not mistaken, she had appropriated other things besides letters—such unconsidered things as rings and a bracelet. I have seen her wear them, which was a blunder on her part. A word from me, and she would lose her place and her character. Besides, Josine is French—she enjoys an affair of intrigue, it is meat and drink to her; and she hates, she detests Miss Carlisle. Oh, you may rely on Josine, my lady!"

"At the mercy of a servant!" murmured Lady Blanche, with suppressed bitterness.

He laughed.

"We are all at the mercy of some one or other, my lady. Lord Norman, for instance, is at the mercy of you and me; while I—oh, I am at the mercy of my tailor, my landlady—the world at large! Is your ladyship afraid?" he broke off, with a sarcastic smile. "If so, admit it, and let us have done with the matter. After all, it will not affect me, this marriage of Miss Carlisle and Lord Norman, so much as it will affect you—"

She put up her hand to silence him.

"I am not afraid!" she said, with calm *hauteur*. "I am merely anxious to guard against failure; failure which would mean ruin to me, ruin and shame unspeakable," and her lips quivered.

"Pardon me," he said, suavely; "it is my part to take all the precautions against failure, and I have done, and will do so. Leave it to me, Lady Blanche! Rest assured that I am too fond of my little plot to permit it to miss fire. If you will carry out the instructions I have given you, you will find that we shall succeed beyond our expectations."

Lady Blanche rose, and drew her veil over her face, and he stooped and picked up his sticks.

"You will send Josine to me, my lady?" he asked. "Send her to the plantation to gather some wild flowers for your hair to-night. I will wait here for her. And, if I might make a suggestion?"

Lady Blanche inclined her head.

"If I were your ladyship I would give her some trifle in the way of ornament. Josine's heart is set on baubles [illegible]d a bracelet or a pair of ear-rings would bind her to yo[illegible] bond closer than love itself," and he smiled.

Lady Blanche nodded, and turned to leave the wood, but paused to look back over her shoulder and say;

"Do not send me any more notes. Give Josine any message you may have for me, please."

He nodded approvingly, and without a word of adieu she glided from the plantation.

As she neared the house she saw Lady Pendleton and several others standing on the terrace.

Lady Betty bent over the stone coping to nod a greeting

"Why, where have you been, Blanche?" she asked.

All eyes were turned on her, and for a moment her face flushed; it seemed to her as if the dullest of them must read her secret in her face.

"To the plantation," she said; "and I am almost inclined to go back. There were such lovely flowers there, and it never occurred to me until I had left them behind how nice some of them would look in one's hair to-night!"

Two or three of the young men who were loitering about instantly pushed forward.

"We'll go and gather you a bunch, Lady Blanche!" said one, and the rest eagerly echoed the offer.

She smiled.

"Thanks; but you would not know which to pick, or you would pick them with too short a stem. No, but if Lady Pendleton will allow her maid to go—"

"Of course I will!" said Lady Betty. "Josine would be glad of the excuse to get out. Will one of you be so kind as to ask one of the army of footmen to go on a voyage of discovery for her? I'd go to my room and ring for her if it were not such a terrible way!"

One or two of them laughingly went to find Josine, and in a minute or two that young lady stood before her mistress, with her dark face set demurely.

"Oh, go into the woods and get some wild flowers, Josine!" said Lady Pendleton.

"You will find them in the plantation by the hedge," said Lady Blanche, languidly, and without raising her eyes.

Josine shot a curious glance from one to the other.

"We want them for our hair," explained Lady Betty.

"Certainly, miladi," said Josine, with a respectful bend of the head and a second sharp glance at Lady Blanche as she went off.

Lady Blanche sat on the terrace with the rest, joining in the conversation, and even laughing—a rare thing for her—at the feeble sallies of wit provided by the young gentlemen in attendance; and Lady Betty, to whom Lady Blanche was a perpetual enigma, was wondering what had put her in such a good humor, when the figure of Josine was seen in the distance returning to the house.

"Isn't that Josine?" asked Lady Betty. "She hasn't been gone long!"

Lady Blanche smiled; she knew at once that Josine had found the flowers already picked for her.

"I don't expect she cared very much for a lonely wood," she said, and as she spoke she rose and walked slowly and languidly away, as if she had either forgotten the flowers, or ceased to care for them.

With a fast-beating heart she went to her room, and, sitting down before the glass, scanned her face anxiously.

When Josine came there must be no chink in the mask through which the girl might catch a glimpse of the troubled soul within!

Presently she heard a knock at the door, and in response to her languid "Come in, please!" Josine entered.

With downcast eyes she approached and held out a bunch of flowers, without a word.

"Put them on the table, please," said Lady Blanche.

Josine obeyed, and stood with folded hands and lowered lids.

"Will they suit your ladyship?" she asked.

Lady Blanche took them up and looked at them carelessly.

"Yes, thanks!" she replied, and raised her eyes to Josine's face. As she did so, Josine raised her eyes, and the two looked at each other in silence for a moment; but Josine's glance was eloquent, and Lady Blanche read and understood all that it meant.

"You have taken a great deal of trouble, Josine," she said, languidly, her voice calm and cold.

"Not at all, my lady," she answered. "I am very pleased to be of any service to your ladyship."

"Thank you!" said Lady Blanche, reaching for the jewel-case as she spoke and taking out a pearl and ruby ring. "Will you take this ring, please? I have no doubt it will fit you. You have," glancing at her hands, "slight fingers."

Josine colored with flattered vanity, and her eyes flashed on the ring greedily.

"Oh, your ladyship is too good!" she murmured.

"Oh, no!" said Lady Blanche, with a little quiver. "It is a mere trifle, Josine. By the way"—carelessly—"it would be as well, perhaps, if you did not wear it while you are here! The other servants might be jealous; you understand?"

Josine's black eyes twinkled very intelligently

"I understand, my lady! No, I will not wear it. I am very grateful! Your ladyship may always rely on me, in everything," she added, significantly.

"I am sure of that, Josine," said Lady Blanche.

Josine hesitated a moment, as she put the ring in her pocket, then turned to leave the room.

"I hope the flowers will prove suitable, miladi," she said, in a low voice. "I did not gather them myself; an old man picked them for me."

Lady Blanche flushed for an instant and seemed about to speak, then inclined her head, and with a reverential sweep of the body, Josine took herself off.

Lady Blanche remained in her room nearly all that day; she was "learning her part," a part difficult to play, for the words were of necessity unwritten and would depend upon circumstances; but as the dressing-bell rang she rose from the sofa, on which she had thrown herself for a few minutes' rest, and sleep if possible, prepared to play that part, though its failure, as she had told Oscar Raymond, would mean shame and disgrace to her.

With the sound of the dressing-bell the great place began to echo to the voices of the gentlemen who had been out since luncheon after grouse.

Floris, who was in the pretty little *boudoir* which she shared with Lady Betty, heard Lord Norman stop outside, and opened to his knock.

He leaned against the door, his gun in his hand, looking supremely handsome in his business-like shooting rig, and particularly happy and satisfied.

"Well, my darling!" he murmured, putting his arm round her and drawing her to him; "what have you been doing with yourself? We have had splendid sport—wonderful bag for so short a time and so few guns!"

"Is this one loaded, pray?" asked Floris. "I don't know that I care to have it quite so near, Bruce. How heavy it is! Aren't you tired?" with that little upward glance of wonder and admiration which a woman bestows on the man she loves.

He laughed.

"Not a bit. By the way, don't forget that we are going to have a dance this evening; so put on your finery, and prepare for conquest!"

"I wish you'd go, and let Floris get dressed, Bruce!" called out Lady Betty from the inner room.

"All right," he said, laughingly. "I'm fearfully hungry! Oh, I didn't tell you how nearly we had an accident this afternoon!"

"An accident!" echoed Floris, turning pale—on his account—and glancing at the gun.

He smiled.

"Yes, and all my fault! I was a little ahead of the others near the plantation, when some birds rose right in front of me. I raised my gun, and without thinking of the possibility of there being any one in the wood, fired. The next instant an old man, with long, gray hair, came out from the very spot I had fired at!"

"Oh, Bruce!"

"Don't be alarmed, I hadn't hit him; at least, so I conclude, for the old fellow went off pretty smartly, and disappeared without saying a word; but he shook his fist as he went, which you may consider equivalent to a whole dictionary. He was a curious-looking fellow, dressed in a rough coat. I suppose he was one of the pensioners on the estate, and was gathering firewood, for he had a bundle in his hand. I asked Sir Joseph if he knew him, but he didn't seem to. I must get him to make inquiries."

"So that you may give him a sovereign to cure his fright!" said Floris, archly.

"Exactly!" he said, and taking her face in his hand he kissed her, and went off humming "The Bride's Welcome."

Floris closed the door and returned to her room.

As she did so she heard Lady Betty's voice raised complainingly, and glancing in at the dressing-room saw Josine standing with the hair-brush in her hand a little distance from the table, her face pale and troubled, while Lady Betty was holding her head as if she had been suffering untold agonies.

"What is the matter?" asked Floris, gently.

"That is what I should like to know!" answered Lady Betty. "Here has Josine been tearing my hair out by handfuls for the last quarter of an hour! I don't know what has come over her! She used to be so careful; and now—I declare she seems half idiotic! She doesn't hear one-half the words I speak to her!"

Floris glanced at the dark face, and met an appealing pathetic look from the black eyes.

"Perhaps Josine is not well," she said, gently.

"Why doesn't she say so, then?" retorted Lady Betty. "If she isn't well why doesn't she go and lie down? But, she says she is quite well; that there is nothing the matter with her. I have asked her a dozen times in the course of to-day."

Josine glanced at Floris, lowered her eyes and heaved a deep sigh.

"There!" exclaimed Lady Betty, "that is how she goes on! If she were not far too wise, and too old"—the latter with a little vixenish flash at Josine—"I should say she was in love."

"Oh, miladi!" murmured the girl, but looking at Floris all the time.

"Well, then, if you are not ill and not in love, what is the matter with you?" demanded Lady Betty, not unreasonably.

"I am truly sorry, miladi—"

"Sorry! So am I, and sore, too!" snapped Lady Betty, plaintively. "There, try again, and for goodness' sake pay some attention to your work, or I shan't have any hair left!"

Floris stood for a moment looking at the girl..

She seemed to have something on her mind, to judge by her pale face and the anxious look in her eyes.

"Perhaps she is afraid that Lord Norman will tell Lady Betty about the letter, and her having made her way into the conservatory," she thought; so, as she turned to leave the room, she said, to reassure her:

"Oh, Josine, Lord Norman found the letter and gave it to Lady Seymour. Is that what you are uneasy about?"

Josine crimsoned, then her face went pale again.

"Thank you, miss," she said.

"What letter was that?" demanded Lady Betty.

"A letter one of the servants asked me to give to Lady Seymour, miladi," said Josine, glibly.

"Hem!" snapped Lady Betty. "Yes, that is the sort of work you are best fitted for. I should apply for the next postman's situation that may be vacant."

Floris wanted to ask if that was the letter Josine had lost, or if there was another for Lady Betty, but thought that she would reserve the inquiry for a more fitting time, and went to her room and began to dress herself.

As there was to be a dance that evening, she selected one of her prettiest dresses, and before she had got it on, Josine came softly in to help her.

Floris had accepted her assistance once or twice lately, and though she had never quite liked or believed in the girl, had, from pure good nature, grown to tolerate her.

But this evening Josine's manner attracted her attention very much and puzzled her.

Every now and then the girl drew a long breath and sighed; and once or twice Floris, happening to glance up at the glass, caught the black eyes fixed upon her with an expression that was almost one of absolute pity.

"Josine," she said at last, "I am sure that you are ill. Why do you not tell your mistress and ask her to let you go to bed? I will tell her if you do not like to. Go and lie down this evening and rest."

"Thank you, miss; thank you," Josine murmured. "You are always good and kind—"

"Oh, nonsence!" said Floris, with a little smile.

"Ah, yes, miss; but it is always that you are good and kind to me, while I—I—"

She stopped and turned away, taking up a neat dress and carrying it to the wardrobe.

"While you, what?" asked Floris.

"No matter, miss. It is not I who should speak," said Josine, shutting her lips tightly. "No, it is not I; a servant has no business with a heart! Ah, no, she must use her hands and eyes, but her heart—ah, it is not fitting that she have one!"

"I don't understand you in the least, Josine," said Floris, half puzzled and half amused. "If you are in any trouble, why not confide in Lady Pendleton? I am sure she will help you."

"I! No, it is not I; and miladi can not help. No one can help!" said Josine, almost tragically, but with an air of quiet dignity that impressed Floris, though she tried to think lightly of the matter, putting the whole thing down as French sentiment.

"Well, I am sorry if you are in trouble, Josine," she said, "either on your own account or on any one else's; but you must not make yourself ill."

"Thank you, miss!" responded Josine, gratefully, and she knelt down and arranged the folds of Floris's dress with a careful, one would almost have said, seeing her, a loving attention.

Floris took up her fan and went down-stairs with Lady Betty, and Josine stole on tiptoe to the door and watched them as they passed below her.

"So! I am too old to be in love, miladi, am I?" she muttered, between her white teeth. "Perhaps, oh, yes, perhaps! But I am not too old to spoil the love-making of your sweet Miss Floris! I am wise enough for that! Wait, miladi! Wait, and you shall see!"

Then she stole back to the room, and taking the ring Lady Blanche had given her, held it to the candle-light.

"Oh, you beauty!" she murmured, rapturously. "You beauty! And there are more coming to keep you company! More and more! And money, too! Bah! what fools these grand ladies are! And all for love! I wonder, now," she murmured, musingly, "whether Miss Floris got an inkling of my meaning? These English are so dull! A Frenchwoman would have known in a moment that I had something to tell her. But she! Oh, no! It was, 'Josine, you must be ill!' I shall have to speak plainly, after all. Bah! It is as our friend in the wig says, 'a pretty little comedy!'"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FRENCH MAID'S CUNNING.

ALL unconscious of the plot that was thickening, happily ignorant of the subtle net which was weaving to insnare her, Floris went down to dinner as happy and light-hearted as a girl who has no trouble and a handsome sweetheart can be.

By some chance she fell to the arm of an elderly Scotch lord this evening, while Lady Blanche was consigned to Lord Norman.

Floris felt a little pang of disappointment, for she had, perhaps unreasonably, expected to have him by her side every night at dinner.

But the disappointment passed in a few minutes, for the old lord, delighted at having the prettiest woman in Ballyfloe at his side, made himself very agreeable and kept Floris very much amused.

But for all her amusement she found time to glance at the other two now and then, and when she did so she noticed that Lady Blanche seemed more animated than usual, and that Lord Norman appeared amused and entertained also.

His devotion to Lady Blanche, as the busybodies were styling it, was noticed by every one, and certainly, therefore, did not escape the keen eyes of Lady Betty.

But Floris, though she missed him sorely, did not feel injured or complain; and when Lady Betty made some remark, she defended Lady Blanche and championed Lord Norman quite heroically.

"I don't see why a girl should think that she has a right to monopolize a man because he happens to be engaged to her," she said, with a little flush—her face had looked rather pale and joyless all day—"there will be plenty of monoply on both sides after they are married."

"Ah, no doubt," said Lady Betty, dryly. "But Blanche seems to think that she can monopolize a man because she is not engaged to him. I don't think she has allowed Bruce to get away from her apron-strings for more than half an hour to-day—that is, during the time he has been at home; and if that isn't monopoly I don't know what is."

A few minutes afterward Lord Norman came up to them. It was nearly bedtime, and the drawing-room was thinning.

Lady Blanche had just gone upstairs, having kissed her hand to Lady Betty and Floris as she passed.

"Well?" he said, dropping into a seat between them. "Are you nearly tired? What a long evening it seems! I suppose it is after the exertion of last night. Floris, I have scarcely had a word with you all day," he added, wistfully.

Lady Betty laughed sarcastically.

"Whose fault is that?"

He looked at her with a half-puzzled smile.

"I don't know. I don't seem to have had a minute to myself, which, of course, means a minute with Floris. And now they have arranged to go to Scarfross to-morrow. We shall be away two days, I am sorry to say."

"Two days?" said Floris, with a little *moue*. "Why, Bruce?"

"Too far to get back the same night, dearest!" he said. "I used to enjoy the expedition one time, but now, this autumn, I would give anything to stay at home. But that is impossible, I am sorry to say. The prince has asked me especially to go. Sir Joseph, with his usual forethought, has arranged that some of the young fellows should remain and take you ladies to the cascades for to-morrow, so that you will not miss us hunters."

"I don't think I should care much about the cascades," said Floris

She was feeling rather tired and listless, and the news that her sweetheart was going to leave her for two whole days—after devoting himself for the two previous ones to Lady Blanche—dispirited her.

"I suppose I can stay here!"

"I hope you will go," he said, quickly, adding with an eagerness which, at the moment, she ascribed to his desire that she should be amused during his absence, but which afterward she read in another and sadder light, "yes, Floris, do go! I particularly wish you to go! Sir Joseph has planned this little expedition mainly on your account, and would be disappointed if you did not go. Besides, what will you do in the house all day if you remain at home? Come, dearest, promise me that you will go!"

"I will go if you wish it, Bruce," she said, dutifully; "that is, if I do not feel very much disinclined," with a smile.

He took her hand and kissed it lovingly.

"You will enjoy it, I am sure," he said. "Blanche is going."

"Oh, then, I am sure we shall enjoy it!" said Lady Betty, with fine sarcasm. "I think we had better go up now, my dear."

He followed them into the hall on his way to the smoking-room, and, there being no one there but themselves, took her in his arms and gave her her "good-night" kiss.

"We are off early in the morning, dearest," he said, "and I shall not see you before I go. Be happy while I am away, and I will bring you a set of antlers as a reward!"

Floris was tired and despondent; a heavy weight seemed to hang over her, and she felt so depressed that she went straight to her own room instead of going into Lady Betty's and talking over the events of the evening, as she usually did.

"I must have danced too much last night," she said to herself, "and am overtired. I shall feel better and brighter in the morning. But I wish Bruce was not going to be away for two whole days! How I shall miss him!"

With this thought and the sigh it occasioned she fell asleep. How long she had slept she did not know; but she was awakened by that consciousness, which we have all of us felt at times, that some one was in the room.

She awoke instantly and raised herself on her elbow, and looked around.

A small lamp was burning on the table, and by its dim light she saw a woman kneeling beside the bed.

It was Josine.

The girl had her head in her arms, and was apparently crying in a subdued, sudden kind of way.

Floris was too startled and surprised to move for a moment, then she sat up and called to her softly.

"Is that you, Josine?" Josine raised her head, and showed a face, pale and tear-bedewed, and fixed her black eyes with a piteous expression on Floris. "What is the matter? What are you doing here?"

Josine dropped her head in her hands again and emitted a low sob.

"Oh, mademoiselle, I cannot sleep! I cannot rest!" murmured Josine, with a little sob and gasp. "I am so very unhappy. There is something on my conscience, something that lies so heavy that I cannot rest night or day. Ah, mademoiselle, I would tell you but that I know you would ruin me!"

"I ruin you! What on earth do you mean?" said Floris. "Stop! I do not wish to hear anything you may have to say—"

"Then mademoiselle is lost!" exclaimed Josine, tragically, "and Lady Blanche will win the day."

Floris did not start or wince, as Josine had expected; she even smiled.

"Are you quite out of your mind, Josine?" she then asked, with calm, stern dignity.

"Ah, mademoiselle takes it as I expected! It is hard to believe that a grand lady like Lady Blanche should descend so low as to try and steal another woman's lover! That is done often enough by people of a lower class—ah, yes! But by so grand a lady as Lady Blanche—ah, no, it is impossible, it is ridiculous, is it not?" sarcastically.

"It is, indeed!" said Floris, gravely; "and if it is only to vent this piece of spiteful impertinence you have intruded into my room at this hour, Josine—"

"Stop, mademoiselle! I am no fool! I did not expect you to believe me! Ah, no, not even when I said that I was in her confidence—"

"In Lady Blanche's confidence?"

"Yes, mademoiselle. It is not uncommon. I am the useful slave that acts as go-between for her ladyship and milord."

"My lord!" said Floris, white to the lips with anger. "Do you dare—"

"Ah, but yes, mademoiselle; I mean Milord Norman!"

Floris stared at her for a moment, then she sunk on to a chair and laughed—actually laughed.

Josine watched her sullenly, but with a close keenness.

It was hard to breed suspicion in that sweet, pure mind, but Josine did not despair.

She had a strong suit to play, and had not played her best cards yet.

"Josine, I am now sure that you are out of your mind," said Floris, at last. "Please go away and let me go to bed and sleep. It is fortunate for you that I have promised not to repeat this *farrago* of nonsense, or you would have received your dismissal to-morrow morning. As it is, I must ask you not to approach or address me again, unless it is absolutely necessary. Go, now, if you please."

Josine sprung to her feet.

"Mademoiselle believes that I lie—that I am deceiving her? Good! Mademoiselle shall see! Give me till to-morrow—no, to-day, and I will prove to her that Lord Norman is false to her! That it is Lady Blanche whom he loves and would wish to make his wife! Yes, mademoiselle shall see, shall hear for herself what I, Josine, already know. Mademoiselle thinks that I lie! Yes, truly, and mademoiselle would tell me again that I lie if I say that Milord Norman and Lady Blanche are going to elope this very day!"

The blow was struck, and well struck, considering.

White to the lips, but with an incredulous smile, Floris rose from her chair and confronted her.

"You are either a very wicked girl, Josine, or you are mad," she said. "Do you know what it is that you have said?"

"Yes, mademoiselle," responded Josine, sullenly; "and I am not mad. Wicked? Yes, I have been wicked, and I should be still, if my conscience would let me rest; but it will not. I can not be Miladi Blanche's slave any longer.

"Tell me all you want to tell me, and then go!" exclaimed Floris, feebly.

"Mademoiselle knows Lord Norman goes out hunting to-day? In an hour or more he will have gone."

Floris's lips formed a "Yes."

"Soh! And that the ladies are to take an excursion—an expedition? Yes! Well, then, what if I say Milord Norman will return—alone—by himself at noon? What if I say that Miladi Blanche will make an excuse and remain at home, and that they will meet in the conservatory and fly together?"

"It is a lie!" panted Floris.

"Soh! Softly, mademoiselle! Proof is what I offered, and it is what I will give. Suppose, when you are starting, you find that miladi refuses to go—that she decides to remain at home? She has the headache, say? She will stay in the house, eh?"

Floris rose up and stared at the black eyes with a wild fascination.

"Will that convince mademoiselle? Yes, or no?"

"No! a thousand times no!" exclaimed Floris.

Josine shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah, well, but you are difficult to convince! Mademoiselle is so young and so innocent that she cannot believe that others not so young and so innocent can be so wicked! Well, now, what if"—she lowered her voice and crept nearer to Floris—

"what if I take mademoiselle to the conservatory, and she see and hear miladi and Lord Norman— Ah!"

Floris shuddered.

"Not till then would I believe you," she said, trying to speak undauntedly.

'Good!" ejaculated Josine. "And then, when mademoiselle sees with her own eyes and hears with her own ears, what about it then?"

She paused and leaned over Floris.

"If I show this to mademoiselle, if I convince her that what I have told her at so much cost to myself is true, will mademoiselle promise me to utter no word, to tell no one, but to leave Ballyfloe at once? If not, I will do nothing. If not, I am ruined. Miladi Blanche has me in the hollow of her hand, and she must not know that I have betrayed her. If I show mademoiselle that I have not lied, if I prove to her that I have told her the truth, will she leave Ballyfloe at once?"

"Yes," said Floris, putting the hair from her brow, "I consent. It is wrong, I know it, I feel it, but—but I can not help it. I am like a reed in your hands. May Heaven forgive you, Josine, if you are deceiving me! And yet, and yet, would to Heaven that you may be deceiving me! Yes, if—if what you say is true, I will promise to leave Ballyfloe at once. I will speak to no one; I will not betray you, my poor girl."

A gleam of satisfaction lit up the black eyes.

"I have mademoiselle's promise that she will not disclose what I have said to a living soul?" said Josine.

Floris shook her head with a gesture of scorn, and pointed to the door.

"You have my promise. I—I shall not break it. Go!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PROOF.

It was a merry party at breakfast next morning; the trip to the cascades was a well-known and favorite one, and the young men who had been left behind were delighted at the opportunity which the absence of such great guns as Lord

Bruce, and some of the others who had formed the hunting party, gave them of scoring with the ladies.

Floris, as she entered the room in her dark-brown habit, was surrounded instantly by an eager circle, each man of which was anxious to get a word from her.

But Floris could do little more than smile this morning; her heart seemed heavy as lead, strive though she did to get rid of the dread and suspicion that tortured her.

Presently, in the midst of the chatter and laughter which always seemed at its merriest at breakfast-time, the tall, graceful figure of Lady Blanche glided into the room.

At sight of her Floris's heart gave a great leap of relief and satisfaction, for Lady Blanche was in her riding habit, and was evidently going to the cascades, therefore Josine was either mad or had, for some purpose of her own, lied!

With a good deal of boisterousness the young men sallied out of the breakfast-room to the stables to see after the horses, as they said, but in reality to get a chance to smoke the morning cigar.

Floris and Lady Betty went upstairs to put their hats and gloves on, and Josine was nowhere to be found.

At that moment Josine was in Lady Blanche's room, standing with demure eyes and clasped hands before her ladyship.

"All is prepared, miladi," she said, in a low voice. "It was a great trouble, and at one time I thought I should have to give it up in despair. It was so hard to convince mademoiselle that milord could be faithless. He is always so devoted to her, as all the world knows. Ah, yes! it was hard."

Lady Blanche colored, as a pang of jealousy ran through her.

"That will do," she said. "And—and the time?"

"Just after lunch, miladi," said Josine, thoughtfully. "There will be nobody at home; the house will be quite clear for the little 'comedy,' as Mr. Raymond calls it!" and she showed her white teeth. "The end of the conservatory, miladi?"

Lady Blanche nodded; then, with a sudden pallor and with downcast eyes, she said:

"And you are sure that she will not reveal what passes?"

"I am convinced!" responded Josine, eagerly. "Miladi may rely on it that nothing in this world will induce her to open her lips! She is too proud, ah, far too proud; rely on that, miladi."

Lady Blanche dismissed her with a nod, then summoned her own maid.

"I shall not go out this morning," she said, quietly. "Please take off this habit and give me a morning gown. When you have done so, take my love to Lady Betty, and tell her that I have received an important letter from Lord Seymour, which I must answer. You need not go until the last moment."

On the way to her mistress's room, Josine met a footman with a telegram on a salver.

"Here you are, Miss Josine," he said. "A telegram for your young lady."

Josine took it and glanced at the direction. It was addressed to Floris.

"Miss Carlisle is no young lady of mine!" she said, showing her teeth, with a spiteful smile. "But I will take it to her and save your long legs," and with a saucy smile she ran past him.

Outside the door she paused, with the telegram in her hand.

"What is this now?" she muttered. "Something that may spoil our little play, perhaps! A plague on it. Shall I give it to her at once? No! Josine must see it first, at any rate! It will keep, no doubt!" and she thrust it in her pocket.

Then she opened the door, and met Lady Betty's inquiry as to where she had been with a profuse apology.

"Josine, we shall have to part," said Lady Betty. "Oh, don't trouble now! I have finished, you tiresome girl! You know I can never put my veil on properly! No, you shall not touch it! Go and see if Miss Carlisle wants you."

Josine went into the adjoining room. Floris was standing before the glass with her hat in her hand, and she shrunk back as the girl approached

"Mademoiselle will not go?" murmured Josine.

"Yes!" said Floris, in a low, stern voice. "I do not believe a word of what you told me last night. You are a wicked girl, Josine!"

"Ah! we shall see!" muttered Josine, bending her head. "Mademoiselle will wait a moment? Listen!" she added, as Lady Blanche's maid entered the next room.

The next instant Lady Betty called out:

"Floris! Blanche has sent to say that she is not going! She has some letters to write!"

Floris turned deathly pale, and caught the edge of the table.

Josine smiled triumphantly, then went into Lady Betty's room, with her cat-like step.

"Miss Carlisle has a headache, miladi. A bad headache! I do not think, if miladi will pardon me, that mademoiselle ought to go for so long a ride in the hot sun."

Lady Betty came into Floris's room at once.

"What is the matter, dear? Why, how pale you look!" with anxious concern. Are you ill?"

Floris could scarcely speak for a moment.

"I—I have a bad headache," she said, and truthfully enough. "I do not think I will go."

"No, don't," said Lady Betty, "I thought you didn't look well this morning. No, you shall stay at home, and I will stay and sit by you."

"No, no!" said Floris. "Please do not—there is no occasion. I would rather you did not!" with a feverish flush. "I—I shall get some sleep, perhaps. I will not stay unless you go!"

Lady Betty hesitated, and Josine stood watching them both.

"Mademoiselle will be better to be quiet and alone," she said, softly.

"Do you think so, dear? Well, if you would rather I went—"

"I would much rather," faltered Floris.

"Let me get you a draught before I go then," said Lady Betty, anxiously; and she went and mixed a draught from her medicine chest. "There, dear, take that; and now lie down and get some sleep. Josine, get Miss Carlisle's dressing-gown, and cover her up well. I am so sorry, dear! I shan't enjoy myself one bit; I shall be thinking of you all the day."

"Do not think of me," said Floris, with a sigh, as she sunk on the bed. Then, with a sudden impulse, she put up her arms and twined them around Lady Betty's neck.

"Good-by," she murmured.

Floris was usually so undemonstrative, that Lady Betty was touched by the simple caress.

"Good-by, my dear," she said, kissing her. "Mind, you are to sleep for quite two hours, and you are not to go into the sun. I shall expect to see you quite yourself when I come back."

And, with a strange reluctance, that she remembered afterward, she left her.

Josine stood looking down at Floris's pale face in silence for a moment, then she bent down and whispered:

"Keep a good heart, mademoiselle. Ah, but no man in the world is worth a heartache, after all!"

Floris looked at her with a mixture of repugnance and fascination.

"Mademoiselle will remain here until I come for her," said Josine, significantly. "And let mademoiselle console herself that it is better to be undeceived than fooled to the top of one's bent."

And with this piece of worldly wisdom and comfort she went out.

Reaching her own room, she locked the door, and took the telegram from her pocket. For some minutes she looked at the mean and miserable envelope which the post office authorities deem a sufficient covering for so important a missive as a telegram, bending it this way and that in the endeavor to decipher some words of the contents.

But the pink paper was folded inward, and with a gesture of impatience, she went down-stairs and got a jug of hot water.

Then, with the patience of a red Indian, she held the envelope over the steam, until the warmed part had become moist enough to allow her to open the envelope.

With a smile of satisfaction, she drew out the telegram and read it.

And as she read it, her face went pale and grave, and her hand shook till the thin paper trembled like a leaf.

"What shall I do?" she murmured. "It is fortunate or unfortunate, as I choose to make it. If I give it to her now it will spoil all; and yet it is hard to keep it," glancing at the scrawl with hard, glittering eyes. "Bah! I will not give it to her until afterward. It will be time enough; ah, yes, it will be time enough!" and carefully re-closing the envelope, she put it back in her pocket.

The morning passed.

How, Floris, lying with a heart torn asunder by conflicting emotions, scarcely knew. All seemed still in the great house. Not one of the guests excepting herself and Lady Blanche, had remained at home; a stillness like that of a calm before some dreadful storm seemed to lie upon the place; and the pitiless sun that streamed through the blinds fell upon her face with a mocking mercilessness.

At last, when she could lie still no longer, she got up and put on a morning dress, and paced the room.

The great clock chimed the hour of two, and as its echo reverberated through the huge place, the door was opened softly, and Josine entered.

She seemed in a state of suppressed excitement, her thin lips set tightly together, her black, beady eyes gleaming like coals.

"Hush!" she whispered, huskily, and putting up a warning finger, for Floris seemed about to cry out. "Do not speak, mademoiselle, but come with me. She has gone downstairs, and he will be here presently."

Josine stole down the stairs, and Floris following her, in the same half-torpid state, found herself in a small hall outside the conservatory.

She recognized it at once as the spot in which she and Lord Norman had discovered Josine hiding. Another coincidence!

Drawing close to her, Josine put her finger to her lips.

"Hush, mademoiselle! Not a word! And remember your promise! Whatever you see you will not betray yourself—or me!"

Floris made a gesture of assent, and Josine, unlocking a door quietly and stealthily, crossed the conservatory, and drawing Floris into a corner, behind the shrubs, pointed to a small room, which led to the conservatory, and was draped at the opening by curtains, partly drawn aside and looped up.

Floris, with the deepest repugnance—which would have been unendurable but that she believed the whole thing to be a farce—looked through the opening, and saw Lady Blanche standing beside a small table.

There was a basket of flowers on the table, and Lady Blanche was making a faint pretense of arranging them, but her whole attitude was eloquent of impatience and deep-rooted anxiety.

At the sight of her Floris drew back with a long breath of fear and doubt.

At every step Josine was making good her words, was producing evidence of the truth of her story.

"Is mademoiselle satisfied so far?" she whispered, close in Floris's ear. "Here is Lady Blanche, as I promised she would be, waiting—waiting for whom? We shall see! Hush!"

As she spoke Floris heard a man's footstep approaching the room from the other side.

Her heart gave a great bound of dread and doubt, then seemed to stand still, for the door opened and Lord Norman, as she thought, entered hurriedly and went up to Lady Blanche.

Floris uttered a cry: for a moment she did not move, she simply stood as if turned to stone, and gazed into the dusky room. Then she staggered and would have fallen, but Josine caught her with one hand, and with the other, with all a Frenchwoman's ready wit, dashed her handkershief in a fountain and held it to Floris's forehead.

As he entered, Lady Blanche started and turned toward him.

"Have you come back? Oh, why did you?" she murmured, and her voice was so low and tremulous that Floris could scarcely catch it.

"Yes, I have come back?" she heard him say, huskily, as if he were laboring under great excitement. "I said that I would do so. Why are you so surprised to see me? Did you think I should break my word, Blanche?"

"I hoped you would not come," she faltered.

"And you are not glad to see me? Ah, Blanche, you will not fail me! Think of all I am risking for your sake: my good name and fame, my very honor! Come, Blanche, tell me that you are steadfast!" and he put his hand on her arm pleadingly.

Lady Blanche shrunk slightly. Floris noticed it with a vague wonder.

"Blanche! dear Blanche! there is no time to lose!" he went on, still in the husky voice which Floris scarcely recognized as Bruce's. "The horses are waiting; all is arranged! Why are you not ready? You promised me that you would be ready to start!"

"Bruce, I can not!" she panted, with a sudden gesture of despair. "I can not do it. You ask too much. Oh, Bruce! Think what all this means! Think of the scandal, and—and think of her! Poor girl! my—my heart bleeds for her! No, Bruce, I can not do it. I love you, and you know it; but you ask too much! You must marry Floris Carlisle, Bruce! It is too late to draw back now!"

"Too late!" he echoed. "It is not too late. You speak only of yourself and her. You do not think of me. Do you forget that you are bidding me ruin my whole life; that you are sending me to marry a girl I do not love, whom I shall learn to hate? Come, Blanche, I can not endure this life of deceit any longer! There must be an end to it sooner or later, and this is the best end. The world may talk—let it! You and I don't care for the world; and as to Floris, she will soon learn to forget me. Heaven may send her a better man; it might do that easily enough, goodness knows! Come, Blanche, get your things, everything is ready."

"No, no, no!" she panted. "I will not, I can not! Go back, Bruce; go back and rejoin the party; make any excuse you like for your absence! I will not go with you. I can not! I was wrong and wicked to promise! But, thank Heaven, it is not too late! Go back, Bruce! We—we—shall always be friends. You—you will be happy with her, poor girl—"

"Is this your last word?" he demanded, drawing back and looking at her, his face still turned from Floris.

"Yes, my last, Bruce," faltered Lady Blanche.

He stood for a moment as if pondering on some way to shake her resolution; then suddenly Lady Blanche seized his arm.

"Bruce! There is some one coming! Go—go at once! If the servants see you here—"

With a smothered oath the man who was so like Lord Norman that even Floris could not in the dim light distinguish between them, seized his hat and whip and strode from the room; and Lady Blanche, almost as if she had suddenly grown suspicious of listeners, glided to the curtains and let them fall over the opening.

The little comedy—or tragedy—was over.

CHAPTER XVII.

FALSE!

WITH slow, weary steps Floris made her way to her room, Josine following her, and sunk exhausted upon the bed.

That there had been any foul play she never suspected for a moment. The resemblance between Oscar Raymond and Lord Norman was so close that it had deceived many of Lord

Norman's intimate friends in broad daylight, and the room in which the little comedy had been enacted was but dimly lighted.

"Will mademoiselle permit me to get her a glass of wine?" Josine inquired, in a low voice

Floris shook her head.

"How soon—can I leave?" she asked, painfully.

Josine pricked up her ears, and glanced at the clock.

"There is the afternoon mail," she said. "But will not mademoiselle wait and see Lady Pendleton?"

"No, no!" responded Floris, with a shudder. "I wish to see no one. I wish to go before they return—at once! Will you"—she hesitated; she hated asking this girl to do anything for her, for she loathed her with a loathing that was unaccountable to her—"will you see if I can do so?"

Josine stole out of the room and went swiftly to Lady Blanche's, and with a slight knock she entered.

Lady Blanche was seated at her table with her proud head bowed in her hands.

Hearing Josine's step she started and rose up, facing her with angry indignation.

"How dare you come here—" she began, then her voice failed and her eyes drooped before the cool, black ones. "Well?" she asked, gloomily.

Josine smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"It is all right, miladi; we have succeeded capitally. Ah, but miladi should have been an actress! She almost deceived Josine, much less the poor Miss Carlisle."

Floris, left alone, sat for some minutes in the same half-stupefied condition. At present she could scarcely grasp all that had happened; but with every minute it was growing upon her, and she was learning to realize that her lover, the man she had loved—alas! still loved—had adored, had looked up to as something more than human—was false, unutterably false and base, and that he had been guilty of treachery so vile as to be almost inconceivable.

Like a lost soul thrust from paradise, she groped in the darkness of her misery, and could see no ray of light or hope; all her future lay dark, dark before her.

"If I could die now," she murmured—"if I had died last night, before I knew of this! But no, I shall not die; I shall live and suffer—suffer! There will be no forgetfulness for me; all my life I shall carry this sorrow with me; all my life will be imbittered with the memory of these few short, happy weeks! Oh, Bruce! Bruce! if you had but left me alone—if you had but had mercy on me! But you had none. Heaven knows I avoided you. I did not, as other women had done, set a snare for your love. A hundred times I fought against it; but you had no mercy; you taught me to love you, and now it is too late to unlearn that lesson. Oh, Bruce, may Heaven forgive you—may Heaven deal more kindly with you than you have dealt with me!"

And with this prayer in her wounded heart, she rose, and in dull, numbed fashion, began mechanically to collect her clothes.

A few minutes afterward Josine came in.

"Ah, that is better!" she said, encouragingly. "Mademoiselle is recovering! Soh, soh! But mademoiselle must rest—Josine will see to the packing for her."

And, with noiseless readiness, she began to fill the large imperial.

Floris sunk on to the bed and watched her with listless apathy.

"There!" said Josine, with a gesture of satisfaction. "All is ready! And now"—she left the room and returned almost immediately with a glass of wine—"mademoiselle must drink this, just to please poor Josine!" she pleaded, as Floris refused it with a shake of the head. "Ah, but yes; mademoiselle must not count too much on her strength! Supposing she should break down and have to be carried back! Ah, but that would be dreadful!"

Floris stretched out her hand for the glass with a shudder.

Josine watched her as she drank the wine and then, and not till then, drew the telegram from her pocket.

"See, mademoiselle!" she said, smoothly. "This has just come; I hope it is not bad news!"

Floris took it apathetically, and opened it, then started up with a wild cry.

"Heavens, mademoiselle! What is it?" exclaimed Josine, with admirably feigned anxiety.

"My mother!" gasped poor Floris. "My mother is ill—dying—quick! I must go at once!"

Josine held up her hands, with a French oath, and hurried forward with Floris's jacket and hat.

"Tut! tut! but that is bad news! But it may not be that the poor lady is dying. Oh, mademoiselle makes too much of it; she sees the worst!"

"Read!" panted Floris. "It says 'Come at once!' Come at once, and I am hundreds of miles away! Oh, Heaven! what shall I do? What shall I do? Quick, or I shall go mad!"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Josine, genuinely anxious, for she dreaded lest some one should return, and a "scene" be the result. "Yes, yes! but for the love of Heaven, be calm, mademoiselle! It may not be so bad; and think, it was impossible for mademoiselle to leave earlier! Ah, but I am so sorry!"

Floris scarcely heard her. With feverish eagerness she hurried on her things, and made straight for the door.

Josine caught up her cloak and bonnet, which she had brought in with her.

"And Lady Pendleton—the message?"

"Give her this!" panted poor Floris, throwing the telegram on the table. "Tell her—I will write." And almost like one distraught, she made her way into the hall.

The footmen and hall porter stared at her white face, and hurried to the door, Josine finding time, as she followed, to whisper:

"Bad news. Mademoiselle is summoned home!"

The brougham door was shut with a bang and the pair of horses dashed toward the station.

Floris shrunk into a corner and sat with clasped hands and closed eyes, and Josine was too wise to utter a word.

Presently the train came up. It was an express from the far north, and several passengers got out to stretch their legs for a moment or two.

Josine had taken a first-class ticket and found an empty compartment.

Floris got in, and would have gone without a word, but Josine leaned forward and said, with a quiver in her voice, which might have been due to remorse, but was more probably caused by excitement:

"Good-by, mademoiselle! You—you—will not forget your promise to poor Josine?"

Floris looked at her vaguely, then she shook her head and turned away.

"I will not forget. No!" she said.

The guard blew his whistle, and Josine stepped back.

As she did so a gentleman rushed out of the station with a sandwich in his hand, and had almost passed Josine on his way to his carriage, when he saw her stopped short.

"Josine!" he exclaimed. "Is that you?"

Josine—her nerves were getting unstrung—uttered a cry.

"Milord Clifforde!" she cried, turning pale.

"Time's up, my lord!" said the guard, who knew Bertie well.

"All right," he said; "one moment."

Then he turned to Josine.

"Are you going up to town? You had better get in."

"No, no! It is mademoiselle!" returned Josine, with agitation.

"Mademoiselle?" he repeated. "Who?" and he went to the window and there saw Floris.

With a sudden pallor he looked from her to Josine.

"It is Miss Carlisle!" he said. "And she is going up to London alone!"

"We really must be starting, my lord!" said the guard coming up again.

"Yes, yes!" said Josine, hurriedly. "Alone, milord!"

"Why?" he demanded, with a troubled frown.

Josine bit her lip.

"Go, milord!" she said. "The train will start without you."

He opened the door of Floris's carriage, nodded to the guard, and as the train started, jumped in.

Josine stood looking after the train with a bewildered stare for quite a minute. Then a curious expression gradually crept into her black eyes. An idea was developing itself in her acute brain.

Floris and Lord Clifforde, who had been her lover, leaving Ballyfloe together! Surely that fact would fit into the plot.

With a smile on her lips she nodded approvingly, then turned and slowly went back to the brougham.

But she paused there, and returned to the station and accosted the sleepy porter.

"Did you see that gentleman who accompanied the young lady who departed just now, sir?" she asked with smooth politeness.

The man stared at her. Oh, yes, he had seen him.

"Well, that was a great personage, sir. It was Milord Cliforde," said Josine, with an air of importance.

"Oh, was it?" said the man, grimly. "Well, lord or no lord, he hadn't any business to keep the train waiting."

"Certainly not!" said Josine. "Good-morning, sir."

Then she returned to the brougham.

"*Parbleu!*" she murmured. "It is likely that Milord Norman will not believe poor Josine. Soh! My friend the porter will bear witness that Miss Carlisle went off with Milord Clifforde! Bah! but Miladi Blanche is not so clever as I think her if she cannot make something of that!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN IRREPARABLE WRONG.

FLORIS looked up as Bertie entered the carriage.

"Lord Clifforde!" she said, faintly.

"Miss Carlisle!" he responded; and the two looked at each other in silence for a moment.

The shock of the meeting had considerably moved Bertie, and he scarcely knew what to say.

He had thought of her every day since the night he had told her of his love and received his dismissal; she was, in fact, scarcely ever out of his mind.

"Are you going south—to London?" he asked, as carelessly as he could. "I am so surprised at seeing you that I can scarcely realize that it is indeed you!" he added, ingenuously.

"Yes, I am going to London," she answered, wearily.

"I—I hope on no sad errand!" he said, very gently. "You look ill and tired—"

"I am both ill and tired," she said, trying to smile, and so bringing the tears to her eyes. "I have a telegram saying that my mother is dying, Lord Clifforde."

He did not say that he was sorry; his face, his eyes, said that sufficiently plainly, but he looked at his watch.

"I am glad that this is the express," he said. "We shall be there early in the morning. I hope that you will find Mrs. Carlisle better than you expect."

Floris's lips moved in an inaudible "Thank you!" and she let her head sink back on the cushion.

Bertie got up and drew the window curtain, dragged his own foot-warmer forward for her, and carefully arranged his rugs over her.

"You must let me make you as comfortable as I can," he said, apologetically. "It is not much one can do to get comfortable in a railway carriage, unfortunately."

"Thank you!" said poor Floris, faintly, finding her voice. "Are you going to London?" she asked.

"Yes, through London," he answered, his frank, blue eyes stealing an anxious glance at the pale face. "I can not tell you how glad I am that I should happen to be traveling by this train. I did not know I was coming till the last moment."

"No?" she said.

There was silence for a moment. The one question haunted and worried him: why was she traveling alone? Even at the cost of wearying, perhaps harassing her, he must know.

"You have been staying at Ballyfloe?" he asked, gently.

"Yes," said Floris, her eyes fixed on the rug, her hands clasped tightly.

She knew what was passing in his mind and the question that was coming, and she dreaded it as the wounded man dreads the surgeon's probing knife.

"With the Lynches, of course?" said Bertie. "I remember reading your name among the list of visitors in the papers."

"Yes," she said.

"Is—is Bruce there still? But, of course, he is not, or you would not be alone. I read of your—your engagement, Miss Carlisle," he added, hurriedly, and with a sudden flush on his handsome face, that was rather paler than of old.

Floris winced.

"Lord Norman is still at Ballyfloe," she replied, in a low voice.

Bertie stared, crimsoned, and turned pale.

Bruce at Ballyfloe, and permits her to take this long journey in the train alone?

"Is he?" he said. "Why didn't he—I beg your pardon! Please do not be angry or think me impertinent."

"No, no!" she broke in, with a quivering lip. "Do not say any more. I am tired, and—and ill, I think!" piteously.

"Oh, forgive me!" he said, remorsefully; "but, indeed, it was not idle curiosity."

"I know," she murmured.

"I will not harass you," he said. "Will you try and get some sleep? Let me pull this rug more closely round you. Try and rest and get some sleep, if possible."

The train sped on, the green fields gave place to rows of houses and workshops, and presently the engine snorted and steamed into the great terminus.

"Wait here; do not move," he said. "I will come for you when I am ready," and he got out and went for her luggage.

"I have got a cab," he said, when he returned. "There is just time to catch the other train."

He drew her arm within his and placed her in the cab, and then followed.

"Oh, do not come!" she said. "I have given you trouble and anxiety enough; please do not come any further!"

"I am coming to the station, if you will let me," he answered, simply, and he added, but too low for her to hear, "Would to Heaven that I could go all the way with you!"

"Will you write to me and let me know how you get on?" he asked when the cab had got on the asphalt. "I will give you the address."

"Yes," said Floris, meekly.

They neared the other station; the time was approaching when he must leave her. His heart began to beat with a wistful yearning to learn the truth; and suddenly, so suddenly that Floris started, he leaned forward.

"Floris—Miss Carlisle—I shall leave you in a few minutes, Heaven knows how sorrowfully and anxiously! Will you let that anxiety plead for me, if I ask you to tell me why you have left Bruce at Ballyfloe? Why he has let you take this journey alone?"

"I—I can not tell you!" she answered, brokenly.

His face went pale.

"Then something has happened! For Heaven's sake, tell me, Floris! I can not leave you without seeing whether I can not help you. Have pity on me, and tell me."

"You can not help me—no one can help me!" she murmured, her hands clasped tightly together, her face wan and white.

"You do not know; at any rate, tell me. You can confide in me as if—as if I were your brother. I would to Heaven that I were!"

Floris shook her head.

"Why has Bruce not come with you?" he asked, his blue eyes fixed on hers appealingly.

She shuddered.

"Do not speak of him. Let—let me forget him."

"Forget him! Forget Bruce! Why, it was only the other day that you were engaged to him!" he said, trembling with excitement. "Are you not—is the engagement broken off? For Heaven's sake, tell me, Floris!"

She raised her eyes to his solemnly.

"Yes; it is broken off."

He drew a long breath, his eyes still fixed on her.

"And it is this, then, added to the bad news from home, that makes you look like this! I—I guessed it! But why? What has happened? Oh, Floris, it makes my heart ache to see you looking so wretched and miserable! Floris, you know that I would gladly give up my life, if it would purchase an hour's happiness for you."

She put out her hand, pleading to him for silence; but he would not, could not, stop.

"You know it! Floris, let me help you. Tell me what has happened. Have you quarreled?"

She shook her head.

"No! Then—then it is Bruce's fault! In any case, it must be his! But he will be sorry! It is not too late to bring things round again. Floris, let me be as your brother should. Let me have the satisfaction of healing this breach between you. May I?"

"No!" she said, huskily. "No one can do that—not even you!"

"Let me write to him!" he pleaded. "We are old friends. He would take more from me than from any one else. Floris, if I know him, he is at this moment suffering as deeply as you are. But it is not of him I am thinking, but of you—of you! Let me write! A word now will do so much good!"

The tears ran down her face as she shook her head.

"No word that can be written can do any good," she murmured, and there was something in the tone of her voice which carried conviction to Bertie's soul.

"Then—then he has done you some great wrong!" he said, and his face crimsoned angrily. "Is it not so?"

"He has done me a wrong beyond reparation," she said, simply.

He threw his ulster apart as if he were stifling.

"Great Heaven! Has—has he been false to you? No, that is not possible."

She turned her face away.

"He has! Bruce! Oh, Floris, there must be some awful mistake. See, now, I have known Bruce all my whole life; I would answer for his honor with my own—"

"Oh, stop, stop!" she moaned. "It is all of no use! I, too, would have answered for his honor with my life—and you see that we are parted—and—and so soon!" and her lips quivered. "Do not say any more to me. Nothing, nothing can bridge over the gulf between me and Lord Norman. I have seen him for the last time. If you think we have quarreled, do you think I would not have been the first to own myself wrong? I would have gone on my knees to him! Quarreled! Any quarrel may be healed, but this that has come between us is a barrier which no words, no time, even, can cast down! If you have any pity for me—"

"Floris!"

"Do not say another word. Promise me that you will not write to him. Write! It would be a humiliation too terrible to be thought of! Oh, Lord Clifforde, do not think me ungrateful! I always thought of you as a friend. I have not forgotten"—her tears came thick and fast now—"your promised to be a friend if I should ever need one, and I am grateful—grateful! But no friend, not even a brother, could do or say aught that would help me now."

Bertie wiped the drops of perspiration from his brow, too agitated to speak.

"What is to be done?" he slowly muttered.

"Nothing!" said Floris. "Lord Clifforde, we have all our own troubles to bear; I must bear mine as best I can. But I shall never forget your kindness, never! Heaven knows how gratefully I shall remember it!" and she held out her white, trembling hand.

He took it and pressed it almost fiercely.

"If I had but known! If I could but have foreseen!" he murmured, very despairingly.

She shook her head.

"You could not have helped me!"

"No, no!" he said. "But"—he took out his watch as the cab drew up at the station—"but one thing I could have done; I could have kept out of the fool's errand I am bound on!"

She looked at him questioningly. His lips were set tightly, his brows drawn as if with pain.

"Floris—Miss Carlisle—just now I said how sorry I was I could not go further with you than this station. That was before I knew this, before I knew how badly you wanted a friend. Judge how deeply, how madly I must regret it now! Floris, the reason I can not go with you, see you safely at home, and remain near you to help you, if possible, is that I am leaving England at once."

"Leaving England?" she said, in a very dull way.

"Yes," he answered, gnawing at his mustache, his face white and drawn. "Yes; I am ordered on active service. I am now on my way to join my regiment at the docks. I shall just have time to do so and no more."

"Your regiment?"

"Floris," he went on, his eyes fixed on her wistfully, "I tried hard to forget you—ah, do not shrink! Do not think I would speak of my love now, now that you are in this trouble? No! I tried to get over my sorrow, tried honestly, but I could not. A stronger man might have done so, but I am not strong, or my love for you was stronger than myself! Let it be as it may, I have failed. When I read in the papers that Bruce had won what I had lost, England became hateful to me. I could not bear to face the probability of meeting you and him while my love for you lived in my heart so strongly. This war broke out; they wanted volunteers. I was an officer in the militia, and eligible, and I offered myself for active service. They accepted me only yesterday, and ordered me out."

His hand sought hers, and grasped it tightly, and Floris could not find it in her heart to draw it away.

"A few hours ago I might have backed out, or got an exchange; but there is not time now. There is hardly time to present myself. I must go! I must go and leave you, Floris, to meet this trouble alone. Oh, Heaven, what fools men are! If I had but waited— Oh, don't misunderstand me!" for Floris had shrunk back. "It is not that I have any wild hope of winning you, though Heaven only knows what such love as mine could compass! In time you might have had pity on me, if all is really over between Bruce and you. But it was not that hope of which I was thinking. I regard myself as your brother, Floris; dear Floris! and I must leave you"—his voice faltered—"I may never see you again! It is hard to leave you in such trouble and alone—but I must do so!"

"Do not think of me!" murmured Floris.

He stared at his watch, and thrust it back in his pocket with a groan.

"Yes; we must part! Just when I might have been of some use to you! Fool! fool!" and he clasped her hand with a despairing gesture.

"Oh, hush, hush!" murmured Floris. "You could not have helped me! Do not think of me! But this war—"

He laughed bitterly.

"Who cares about the war?" he retorted. "It was an excuse to get away; to do something, so that in the doing of it I might forget you; and now I shall carry this remembrance of you with me! Alone! Alone, with no one by your side, while I might have been near you, to help and comfort you. Yes, I have been a fool, and I am rightly punished!"

It was Floris's turn to console. Gently, timidly, she put out her hand and took his.

"And do you think you have not comforted me?" she murmured, her sad voice grown soft and tender. "Dear friend, the memory of your kindness and tender-heartedness will remain with me though you have gone. Do not forget me, Lord Cliffordе; remember that you have a sister here in England who will pray for your safety and happiness, and who, happen what may, will never forget how true a friend you have been to her!"

No man will have cause to blush for Bertie when we say that the tears swam thickly in his eyes.

"Heaven bless you, Floris!" he whispered. "Would to Heaven that I had had Bruce's luck! I would not have squandered it and trampled it under foot as he has done!"

There was time for no more; there was, indeed, scarcely time to get her ticket. But he did get it, and put her in the train, and stood at the car door, holding her hand in his to the last minute.

"Good-by, Floris! You take my heart with you, sister!"

Then she was borne out of his sight. And so Floris lost both her lovers in one day.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEER-STALKERS.

In the "good, old times," which, thank Heaven, by the way, we shall never see again, favored mortals were supposed to have been guided by spirits, which, when the favored mortals were thinking of setting out on adventures, whispered, "Go thou!" or "Do not go!"

If Lord Norman had been in possession of such a guiding spirit it would certainly have whispered in his ear, on the morning of the Scarfross expedition, "Do not go!"

As it was, though he had no presentiments of coming evil, and the plot which had been laid for the destruction of his happiness, he was not very keen on the outing.

Deer-stalking had been a passion to him, and there was no one whose knowledge of the sport was greater than his, no one whose eyes were keener, or whose physical endurance was greater.

But on this occasion he would rather have remained at Ballyfloe, and spent the two days with Floris.

To back out of the affair was for him, however, an impossibility.

Sir Joseph had organized the expedition for weeks past; and then again, there was the personage who particularly desired Lord Norman's company.

The party started in the early morning, on horseback, attended by a few favored Highland servants, who were experts in stalking, and everybody who knew anything of the sport declared that the prospects were first-rate, and that the sturdy Scotch ponies would soon return laden with the royal game.

Lord Norman, who had been rather silent during the long ride, grew more cheerful after dinner, and when the cigars were alight vouchsafed to relate some of his experiences in deer-stalking, and to be generally amusing.

They gathered round the fire, chatting, until eleven, then, by mutual consent, went off to bed.

As the accommodation was strictly limited, two men had to sleep in a room, and Lord Norman found that his companion chanced to be a young fellow fresh from college, who was an intense admirer of his, and who, in fact, had begged and prayed Sir Joseph to arrange that he should share Lord Norman's room.

The boy—he was very little more—had stolen up a short time before the general withdrawal, and had seen that a good fire was burning, and had, with his own hands, made the rough apartment as ship-shape as it could be made by the arrangement of rugs and shawls, choosing for himself the smallest bed, and in every way he could think of studying his hero's comfort; feeling that if he could gain Lord Norman's permission to be near him on the eventful morrow, he should be amply rewarded.

"Well, Harry," said Lord Bruce, looking round, "you haven't forgotten your old fagging days. You have made the room quite home-like. What a splendid fire! The worst of it is one is always tempted to sit up and keep it company. Do you mind if I have a cigar? Say so, if you do."

"Mind!" said Lord Harry, fervently. "I'll have one, too. if I shan't be disturbing you by sitting up."

Lord Norman laughed. The boy's devotion pleased him.

"Here, take one of these," he said, giving him his case. "We mustn't sit up long, though. We start almost at daybreak, and it will be hard work, and no rest to-morrow, Harry."

"I shan't sleep for thinking of it," said Lord Harry—he had come into his title a few months back. "Oh, by the way, Norman, would you mind my going with you, instead of one of the others? I know it is a great favor I am asking and I shan't be too much cut up if you refuse," he went on, eagerly; "but if you say 'yes,' I'll promise to do exactly as you tell me, and not make a nuisance of myself."

Lord Norman nodded.

"I shall be very glad to have you, Harry," he said, little guessing what would come of the boy's request. "And I'm sure you will be anything but a nuisance."

Lord Harry expressed his gratitude quietly; he knew his hero disliked any fuss, and the two drew near the fire and smoked and talked; that is, Lord Norman talked and the boy listened with reverent ears and closely-riveted attention.

Lord Norman told him exactly what he would have to do on the morrow, impressing upon him how necessary it would be to maintain perfect silence, and to guard against his being seen by the deer.

"Deer-crawling it might be called, instead of deer-stalking," he said, "for we shall literally have to crawl and drag ourselves over the ground once the game is spotted."

"I shall watch you, Norman, and do exactly as I see you do," said Lord Harry, earnestly.

"And luck standing by us, we will give a good account of ourselves. And now we had better turn in, I think."

Lord Harry got up at once with the obedience of a private to his officer, and went to bed, but Lord Norman sat and watched the fire for a long time before he retired.

It was a noisy breakfast party next morning; most of the men taking their coffee and broiled ham and eggs standing, and as the sun rose from behind the hills, they set out, themselves on foot, the gillies bringing up the rear with the horses.

As he had promised, Lord Norman chose Harry for his companion, and, accompanied by Donald, they took the line allotted to them, and commenced the day's work in a glow of pleasant excitement.

The country was as familiar to Donald as Fleet Street was to Doctor Johnson, and with the cunning of a Red Indian, he guided them to the most likely spot for the big game.

In silence the men crept from sheltering rock to sheltering rock, Donald's keen eyes always on the lookout for the vision of a pair of antlers between them and the blue sky.

About noon, as they were lying hidden in a little hollow with their guns in their hands, Donald made a slight motion with his hand, and presently a stag moved from behind the hills in front of them and came proudly into the valley.

Harry, watching his hero, saw him press himself, as it were, into the ground, and followed his example.

The eyes of the three men were glued on the approaching monarch of the glen, their hearts beating so fast that the boy fancied the stag must hear them and take flight.

Slowly, haughtily, the beautiful creature advanced; then, while still out of range, turned and threw up its head, as if scenting the air.

There was a moment of awful suspense for the silent watchers; then the stag, appearing reassured, moved slightly round, still advancing.

The moment he came within range Norman turned his eyes on Harry, and formed the word "fire" with his lips.

The boy hesitated; it was too generous a sacrifice.

He looked at Lord Norman questioningly; then seeing that he might accept the offer, took aim, and—missed.

Donald growled; but at the same instant Lord Norman fired, and the stag leaped into the air and fell prone on its side.

Lord Harry, with a boy's enthusiasm, sprung to his feet with a triumphant shout, and dashed toward it.

Now it does not follow that because a stag falls he is dead.

Donald and Lord Norman, knowing the danger, shouted warningly; but Lord Harry, misunderstanding them, kept on his way and had reached the stag, when it sprung to its feet and charged full at him.

It was an awful sight. The beast looked monstrous in its savage fury, and the boy seemed paralyzed.

All would have been over with him had he not, fortunately, caught his foot in the heather and slipped at the moment the stag would have reached him, and instead of striking him, the beast went over his prostrate form.

In an instant it turned to renew the attack, but by this time Lord Norman had come up, and standing over the boy, raised his gun by the stock to strike the animal.

There was one confused mingling of man and stag—an awful crashing sound, broken bones, and Lord Norman went down, as if felled by a tree.

Then, and not till then, dared Donald venture to fire and bring the great beast down, and it fell without a groan, and dead this time, right across Lord Norman's body.

It all happened in so short a space of time that the poor boy stood staring with white face and starting eyes, scarcely realizing the consequences of his inexperience.

Donald, with savage Highland imprecations, dragged the stag from the prostrate form of Lord Norman, and raised his head, and Lord Harry fell on his knees beside him.

"Oh! what have I done—what have I done?" he cried. "Is he dead, Donald? Oh! Donald, Donald—what shall we do now?"

"Haud your tongue, and give me the flask, mon!" said Donald, savagely. "If the laird be dead, he's give his life for ye, that's sure enough; the beastie would have killed thee. Unloose his neck-cloth, and run to the brook we passed for some water. Get it in your cap. And shout wi' all ye strength as ye go."

Poor Lord Harry bounded off, shouting at the top of his voice; but the hills seemed to echo his cry for help with infinite mockery. When he came back, Lord Norman was still unconscious.

His face and breast were covered with blood, flowing from wounds in his head and neck, and Donald could not give any opinion as to the extent of his injuries.

Neither the water nor the brandy would restore Lord Norman to consciousness, and for the first time in his life the sturdy old Highlander looked at a loss.

"No, no; he's not dead, mon," he said, in reply to Lord Harry's frenzied inquiries; "but I'd like to see him come to! Climb yonder hill there, and fire your gun, and shout; maybe some of the party will be near and come over and help us."

Lord Harry snatched up his gun and tore off, and Donald washed the wounds as well as he could with the little water he had, and forced some brandy through the clinched lips.

The stag had struck a ferocious blow—his last in this life—and the antlers had broken Lord Norman's skull, and cut his neck and breast to a fearful extent. The thick coat was slashed and torn as if it had been divided by a keen-edged knife.

Presently, while Donald was eying the stalwart frame and wondering whether it would be possible for him to carry it any distance, he heard the voices of men shouting from behind the hill, and in a few moments Lord Harry returned at full speed.

"They are coming!" he panted. "Thank Heaven, they are coming! Oh, Donald, what shall I do? Some more water!" and off he ran again.

The approaching figure proved to be Sir Joseph and a servant with a pony. Sir Joseph's distress at sight of the unconscious, bleeding figure of Lord Norman was almost as great as Lord Harry's; but there was no time lost in idle bewailing.

Carefully and tenderly they lifted the wounded man and placed him acress the pony, Donald and Sir Joseph supporting him in as easy a position as possible, and the mournful *cotege* then started for the hut.

They could only go at a walking pace, and the way seemed interminable, but at last they reached the hut, and Lord Norman was carried into the room which last night he had paced with presentiments of coming ill thick upon him.

One of the men was dispatched on the fleetest horse to Ballyfloe for medical assistance—fortunately there happened to be a young doctor among the guests—and Lord Norman was carefully undressed and his wounds bound and attended. to.

Toward evening he recovered consciousness.

Opening his eyes he fixed them on Sir Joseph, who stood beside him, with a troubled expression, and his lips moved.

Sir Joseph bent down and caught the word:

"Floris!"

He understood in a moment.

"It is all right, my dear Norman. I have sent to Ballyfloe, of course, but my man is intelligent and will not alarm Miss Carlisle.

Lord Norman panted forth a sigh of relief, then his brow knit as if he were striving to remember something, and he murmured:

"Harry!"

The boy had implored them to allow him to remain in the room, and Sir Joseph beckoned him forward.

"He is all safe!" he said.

Lord Norman smiled, as the boy fell on his knees beside the bed, and gently stretched out his hand, which poor Lord Harry seized and pressed miserably.

These efforts, slight as they were, proved too great, and Lord Norman instantly relapsed into unconsciousness.

So there he lay, helpless in mind and body while Floris—hundreds of miles away—was by her mother's bedside, and separated from him, alas! by more than miles.

Certainly evil chance had favored Lady Blanche, and—"the wicked were flourishing!"

CHAPTER XX.

RULED BY DESTINY.

The brougham whirled Josine back from the station, and she made her way at once to Lady Blanche.

Her ladyship was lying down on the couch in her room, and merely turned her head as Josine entered; her face was very pale, and there were dark marks under the eys, telling of the agony of suspense and actual fear she had endured, "Well?" she said, her dark-krown eyes resting on Josine's face with feverish, haughty impatience.

Josine smiled, and began taking off her gloves as she would have done in the presence of an equal, and Lady Blanche flushed as she noticed the action.

"It is all right, miladi!" said Josine. "Fortune has favored us, and Miss Carlisle has gone to London, to—ah, who cares where?—by the afternoon train!"

Lady Blanche drew a breath of relief and turned her face away.

"Oh, yes, our little comedy has finished spendidlly!" went on Josine; "and it deserved to, for it was admirably conceived and carried out. But, ah, Heaven, the trouble it was to convince mademoiselle that milord could be false!"

Lady Blanche leaned her face on her hand and frowned.

"You think that all is safe," she said, coldly, "whereas I can see that we are at only the beginning of the affair. Do you think that Lord Norman will not write to her—follow her? Josine, I fear that this will end badly. I am sorry that—that I was tempted to have anything to do with it." And she began to pace the room.

Josine looked at her rather contemptuously.

"Miladi loses courage when the battle is over," she said. "Bah! there is little sense in that. Pardon"—for Lady Blanche had turned on her with fierce *hauteur*—"pardon, but is it not true, miladi? Is not mademoiselle gone, never to return?"

Lady Blanche smiled bitterly.

"My poor girl," she said, scornfully. "I fear that she will return, all too quickly, and that our punishment will be as speedy. Lord Norman is no fool—not a man to be deceived and bullied—"

"Bullied, no, perhaps; but deceived, yes!" retorted Josine, showing her teeth. "Any man can be deceived, miladi. Bah! it is easier than deceiving a woman."

"You may try," said Lady Blanche, grimly. "And first, you will have to account for Miss Carlisle's absence. I have been going over the whole shameful business while you have been away, and I wish to Heaven that I had had nothing to do with it!"

The reaction had set in after the time of excitement; and fear, actual fear, had taken possession of Lady Blanche.

"To account for mademoiselle's sudden flight is easy. I have two reasons," said Josine. "First, here is this."

And she took the telegram and laid it on the table.

Lady Blanche glanced at it and turned pale.

A sharp pang of pity, actual pity for Floris, shot through her heart, and then it turned to stone again.

She pushed the telegram away with her white hand, petulantly, impatiently.

"Lord Norman will follow her immediately he returns from Scarfross," she said, with an air of conviction.

"Ah, well; then he must not see this telegram!" rejoined Josine. "And now for the other reason for mademoiselle's disappearance. What if we say that she went off with Milord Clifforde—"

Lady Blanche stared at her as if she thought the girl had taken leave of her senses.

"Gone off with Lord Clifforde!" she repeated. "What use would be such a lie as that, which would be detected at once?"

"But it is no lie!" said Josine, coolly, enjoying the amazement she had excited. "It is certain that Miss Carlisle was met at the station by Milord Clifforde, for I saw him!"

Lady Blanche smiled contemptuously.

"No one will believe that, my good girl!" she said.

Josine shrugged her shoulders.

"On my bare word? Perhaps not! But all the same, Milord Clifford was there, and traveled to London in the same car with Miss Carlisle! Others saw him—the porter—the guard, who knew him—"

Lady Blanche sprung to her feet, pale and breathless.

"Can it be possible?" she murmured.

Josine laughed.

"It is quite true, miladi! It was a strange coincidence, certainly; a happy chance. Accident is favorable to us, is it not? Now see, what is easier than to put this telegram on the fire—so"—she flung the telelgram in the grate as she spoke—"and to say that we know nothing excepting that a telegram did come from some one or somewhere, and that Miss Carlisle did start for London at once, and that Milord Clifforde met her at the station? I make no accusations! No, Heaven forbid!" she went on, with a smile. "I say nothing! Ah, no, I'll not say the telegram came from Milord Clifforde? Certainly not! I do not say that it was an appointment—

their meeting at the train—but others will—all the ladies here who love scandal—and Milord Norman will believe them!"

Lady Blanche stood regarding her with breathless intentness.

"I shall tell no lies!" said Josine, coolly. "I shall tell the truth—all but excepting the telegram. That I know nothing about save that it came! You see, miladi, that the trump cards are all in our hands; we have just to play them—so!"

Lady Blanche sunk back in her chair again.

Suppress the telegram! Another crime! Step by step she was sinking to the lowest depths of deceit and mental depravity.

And yet what could she do? She had set out upon the sea of falsehood, and must drift, drift, drift with the tide of circumstances.

She must decide at once. In a short time—an hour or two—the party would have returned from the Cascades, and Floris's absence would have to be accounted for.

With a troubled frown she got up, and going to her jewel-case took out a bundle of notes.

Almost solemnly she held them out to Josine, who stood watching her with glittering eyes.

"Take these," she said; "it is the reward we agreed upon. I give them to you willingly—you have earned them. But from this moment I will have nothing more to do with the affair. I know nothing about Miss Carlisle's flight, and will say nothing, remember that! Tell what lies you please, account for her absence in any way that suits you best; but do not expect me to help you or to bear out any of your statements. From this moment I wash my hands of the business!" And she turned away.

Josine laughed.

"That is well said, miladi! Truly now is the time for miladi to wash her hands of the affair; now the affair is done!"

Lady Blanche started.

"All is over and finished—yes! And it is quite wise of miladi to know nothing and say nothing; for her the consequences will work out themselves. And as to Josine—well, she will know nothing, absolutely nothing; and as to Monsieur Raymond—"

Lady Blanche started; for the moment she had almost forgotten him.

"He, too, will be very glad to forget! I am going now, miladi. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Lady Blanche shook her head, and Josine, with a respectful courtesy, departed.

Two hours afterward the party from the Cascades returned.

Lady Blanche could hear them laughing on the terrace outside, and at the sound of their voices a spasm of fear shook her.

How should she face them all, she, with so black a secret, so heavy a load of sin upon her bosom?

Josine, calmly and demurely putting out Lady Betty's evening attire, smiled as she heard them outside.

To her the whole thing was a keen enjoyment, and in anticipation she was reveling in Lady Betty's astonishment and perplexity.

Presently they came trooping upstairs, and Lady Betty entered the room.

"We are late, Josine!" she said; "we must be quick."

"Certainly, miladi. Has miladi had a pleasant day?"

"It has been delightful, Josine," said Lady Betty, who had enjoyed herself immensely, and was in the best of spirits. "Delightful! I am so sorry that Miss Carlisle was not with us! How is she?"

"Better, miladi. Mademoiselle has gone out," demurely.

"Gone out!" said Lady Betty, slipping off her habit. "I'm glad of that; it will do her good. But she ought to be in by this time or she will be awfully late for dinner."

"Miladi misunderstands me," said Josine, suavely; "mademoiselle has gone; has left Ballyfloe."

Lady Betty turned and stared at her.

"Left Ballyfloe! Miss Carlisle! Now don't be an idiot, Josine! What do you mean?"

Josine pretended to be aggrieved.

"Miladi, I tell you only what I know of my own knowledge! Mademoiselle has gone—left Ballyfloe! She went by this afternoon's train!"

Lady Betty flung herself into Floris's room.

Josine had tidied it up, but there were still traces of the packing and no signs of Floris.

With something like a cry of alarm Lady Betty darted back and confronted Josine.

"It is a stupid joke!" she gasped. "Tell me it is, you wicked girl! Where is she? Floris!" And she ran to the door and called. "Where are you?"

Josine stood with a dark smile on her face, and Lady Betty came back, panting and breathless.

"Miladi, it is quite true, I do assure you," said Josine, suavely. "Mademoiselle left Ballyfloe this afternoon. I myself accompanied her to the station, and saw her off."

Lady Betty sat open-eyed and open-mouthed.

"You did—and it is not a joke! Then—then, why did she go?"

Josine shrugged her shoulders and pursed her lips.

"She left some message—some note for me?" said Lady Betty, almost tragically. "Where is it?"

"No; mademoiselle left no note for miladi," replied Josine, gravely; "but message—ah, yes; she said that I was to tell miladi she would write."

"She would write! But why did she go—why did she go?" demanded Lady Betty, in a frenzy.

Josine shrugged her shoulders again.

"Was she sent for?"

"Yes, there was a telegram, miladi."

"You obstinate pig—why couldn't you say so?" almost shrieked Lady Betty, driven frantic by Josine's assumed nonchalance.

"Milaldi didn't ask me."

"Ask you! And who was the telegram from?"

Josine stared with well-simulated indignation.

"How should I know that, miladi? No, I do not know. Mademoiselle burned it—carefully burned it."

"Burned it!" repeated Lady Betty. "Well—and then?"

"And then mademoiselle directed me to pack her box, and order a carriage for the station; and I did so, and accompanied mademoiselle."

"And she has gone up to London by herself!" wailed Lady Betty. "Lord Norman will go out of his mind!"

"Ah! but mademoiselle has not traveled alone. Ah, no!" said Josine. "The gentleman met her at the station, yes."

"The gentleman, you idiot—what gentleman?" demanded Lady Betty, all eyes.

"Milord Clifforde, miladi!" rejoined Josine, demurely.

Lady Betty gazed at her open-mouthed, then turned deep crimson.

"You wicked, lying girl!" she gasped.

"Miladi!" exclaimed Josine, facing round and drawing herself to her full height.

"You wicked girl!" repeated poor Lady Betty. "How dare you stand there and tell me such dreadful lies? Miss Carlisle gone off with Lord Cliforde!"

"Oh, pardon, miladi!" said Josine, sweetly; "it was not I who said that, it was miladi. I only said mademoiselle met milord at the station—not that she had gone off with him."

Lady Betty could have bitten her tongue off.

"You wicked girl; I don't believe a word of what you say! I don't believe that Lord Clifforde was there at all!"

Josine tried to flush, and managed to look fiercely indignant again.

"But yes, miladi, he was!" she insisted. "I myself saw him. He traveled in the same car with mademoiselle! Ah, you do not believe me! Then ask the porter—the guard—who knows him! Inquire for yourself, miladi! Why should I tell miladi a lie? Miss Carlisle will write directly and tell miladi what I now tell her, that she went from Ballyfloe with Milord Clifforde!"

Poor Lady Betty sat transfixed.

Was the girl lying? It seemed impossible that she should be speaking the truth. And yet, why should she lie? What avail would lying be to her? What profit, seeing that, as she said, the truth would be known in a few hours?

Josine held up the dinner-dress calmly.

"Shall I assist miladi?"

"Don't speak to me—yet! Tell me more, Josine! I—I am sorry if—if I called you names that don't belong to you; but—are you sure that it was Lord Clifforde?"

"Ah, but certain, miladi!" said Josine, with a smile. "I knew milord well. Besides, I spoke with him! But, and"—with a sudden look of compunction—"perhaps I ought not to tell! I have betrayed mademoiselle's confidence."

Lady Betty flushed.

"Nonsense! There is no confidence in the matter!"

"I am glad of that!" said Josine, with an air of relief; "for Miss Carlisle did offer me a large sum of money, and though I did not take it, I should not like to betray her confidence."

Lady Betty turned pale.

Floris fled suddenly, without a word of warning or explanation, and in the company of Bertie—Bertie, who had been her most passionate lover—and Floris had offered a large sum of money as a bribe to Josine!

Great Heaven, what did it mean, if it did not mean that Floris had eloped with Bertie?

From whom could the telegram have been, if not from him? As to their meeting at such an out-of-the-way place as Ballyfloe, and both going by the same train by mere coincidence, the idea was too absurd.

Great and merciful Heaven, if—if Floris had—was guilty of such dreadful treachery, what would become of Bruce? Who was to tell him? And he a day's journey from Ballyfloe.

With her head in a whirl, poor Lady Betty allowed herself to be dressed, trembling so with agitation that Josine could scarcely fasten the bracelets around her wrists.

"Look here, Josine," she said at last, after a silence, during which the whole thing had jarred and traveled through her brain; "I don't know why Miss Floris has gone off so suddenly, but—but—there is, of course, good reason for it. Now, you don't want to chatter about it—"

Josine interrupted with a smile.

"Miladi, I never chatter about anything."

"You—you are a good girl," said poor Lady Betty; "and you may have that yellow satin dress you admire so much—"

"Oh, miladi!" gratefully.

"Yes—and—and for goodness' sake, don't let Lady Blanche pump you!" exclaimed poor Lady Betty.

"Certainly not!" responded Josine, with a twinkle in her black eyes.

"And now I'll go down—and what I'm to say, the goodness only knows!" groaned Lady Betty. "Oh, how I wish Bruce was at home, and yet—no, I don't!" she added, with a shudder.

She went down to dinner, and was at once assailed by inquiries after Miss Carlisle's health; and one or two waited anxiously to hear the answer, for the news had floated up from the servant's hall that Miss Carlisle had left Ballyfloe.

Lady Betty, surrounded by very curious eyes, put the best face she could on the matter.

"I am sorry to say," she added, "that Miss Carlisle has been summoned home"—how little she guessed that she was so near the truth—"she was obliged to leave by the afternoon mail."

There were general expressions of regret and sorrow—Floris had made herself very popular—and several of the young men looked inconsolable.

Just then Lady Blanche glided into the room.

She was magnificently dressed, and a hectic flush burned in her usually pale cheek.

Her eyes glittered in the candle-light as brilliantly as the diamond tiara in her hair, and about her was a feverish air of excitement which attracted attention.

"Is not this dreadful about Miss Carlisle, Lady Seymour?" said one of the young men, with a doleful countenance.

"What has happened?" she inquired, looking from one to the other. "An accident?"

"No, no," said Lady Betty, hastily. "Floris has been sent for from home; that is all."

"Oh!" said Lady Blanche, sympathetically; "I am very sorry! And she has gone? What a dreadful journey to take alone!"

Lady Betty looked up at her quickly, but the lovely face was placid and innocent-looking as a child's, and the next moment dinner was announced.

After dinner Floris's sudden departure was discussed from many points. The ladies, who had gathered something from their maids, were inclined to be—well—slightly suspicious; the gentlemen all deplored the absence of the universal favorite and were disconsolate.

Lady Blanche sung and played, with the usual group of courtiers around her; but after a time, when the room grew hot, she took up her fan and strolled out on the terrace through one of the windows.

It was a lovely night—poor Floris was rushing through the air at fifty miles an hour, and Bruce, still at the hut where they had taken him, was lying unconscious to all the world—and Lady Blanche leaned against the stone coping and looked up at the stars.

Destiny ruled over all!

Was it her destiny to marry Lord Norman, or had she toiled and plotted and sinned in vain?

That was her one thought. To Floris, the girl whose happiness she had destroyed, she never gave one passing remembrance; utterly remorseless, she wiped all thought of Floris from her mind.

She had been a shadow across her—Lady Blanche's—path, and had now passed; that was all!

It was to Bruce she now looked. Give her but time and opportunity, and she could—she would—win back his love, and all would be well.

Suddenly while she mused, and shaped the picture under the stars with that hopefulness which comes of a successful effort—criminal or otherwise—she heard her name whispered.

She knew the voice in an instant; it was Oscar Raymond's.

She did not move for a moment or two, while she crushed back the fear and loathing that the sound of the voice had called up, then she bent over the balustrade, and saw him standing on the gravel path.

He was still dressed in close imitation to Lord Norman, and carried the whip in his hand.

So like was he to Lord Norman, so close a shadow, that even as she looked, Lady Blanche shuddered. It was as if she were looking at Bruce's ghost.

He raised his hat, and came close to the railings.

"I need not ask if our plot has prospered, Lady Blanche," he said; "I have read your success in your face. If we had failed, you would scarcely have been able to study the stars so serenely."

He spoke in his usual half-serious, half-mocking tone, which always made Lady Blanche long to leave him at the first sound of it.

She remained silent, looking down, not at him, but at the path, her fan moving slowly to and fro, for though the night was chilly, a fire seemed burning within her that made her hot and feverish.

"Yes, our plot has worked admirably," he said. "The two unconscious puppets have been set dancing to our tune, and all we had in view is accomplished. I have had my revenge, or shall have it in full when Lord Norman returns to-morrow; and you have had—your amusement!"

He laughed the low, sardonic laugh which was so hateful to Lady Blanche.

"And now what remains, Lady Seymour? Only this—my poor reward!"

Lady Blanche inclined her head. The faint light of the young moon fell on his face.

It could not be other than handsome, being so like Bruce's; but there was a deviltry, a sardonic cast in it that made it hateful to her.

The dark eyes looking up into hers seemed alight with the fire of mockery and mastery.

"I am quite prepared to acknowledge your talents, and reward them," she said, coldly. "But is this a fitting time to discuss the matter? We may be interrupted at any moment."

He laughed.

"It is a time that suits me, Lady Seymour. The fact is, it is the only time I have; to-morrow I leave England forever, I hope—"

A faint gleam of relief and satisfaction shone in her eyes, and he noticed it, and smiled.

"Forever, I hope!" he repeated. "My career here has been a failure. On other shores I may blossom out into a great man, but my future prospects have little interest for you, Lady Blanche."

"None!" dropped from her lips like an icicle. He laughed, as if her coldness pleased him.

"I can quite believe that. And now, to speak of more important things. Miss Carlisle has left Lord Norman forever; there can be little doubt of that, I think. Poor, young lady, I am sorry for her! She is very beautiful, is she not?"

Lady Blanche made a slight gesture of assent.

"Ah, yes! I should not know her if I saw her again. Well, that is a consoling thing to know, for beauty has always a good market value, and can command its own price. But what we have to speak of is my price—to put it vulgarly, Lady Blanche. I think you will admit"—taking off his hat, and running his white hand through his hair—"that I have used the situation to its best advantage, and that I have played the part in the comedy of my own invention pretty fairly. At any rate, if Lord Norman does not suffer from the heartache I shall be very much surprised."

Lady Blanche waved the fan to and fro languidlly, but with a certain air of suspense.

"Therefore," he went on, "you will not deem me exorbitant if I ask you to give me a check for twenty thousand pounds!"

Lady Blanche started, and closed the fan sharply.

She was rich—immensely rich—but even immensely rich people do not think little of twenty thousand pounds!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE HOUR OF TRIUMPH.

"TWENTY thousand pounds!" repeated Lady Blanche with very haughty surprise.

He looked at her and smiled.

"It is a large sum," he said. "With the two thousand I have promised, on your behalf, to Josine, it is a fortune—that is, to most persons—but what is it to your ladyship? A mere bagatelle! You are immensely rich; so rich that if it pleased you, you could walk into Howell & James's and purchase a set of diamonds costing twice this sum, and no questions would be asked. I think, if you consider the matter, Lady Blanche, you will admit that you may gain greater pleasure from this day's work than any diamonds, however rare, could afford you."

Lady Blanche leaned against the stone balustrade, with a deep frown on her white brow.

The sum demanded was enormous. And yet what could she do? When the separation of Bruce and Floris had seemed impossible, she had promised this man anything he liked to ask for if he would bring it about; and he had brought it about. She might have guessed that his price would be exorbitant; she might have been prepared for it.

"Shall I tell you why I asked so large a sum, Lady Blanche?" he said, flinging his cigar away and taking off his hat with an air of easy assurance. "I am not, I think you will admit, a vulgar adventurer—an adventurer, truly, but not a vulgar one—and I have no wish to descend into the condition of the vilest of mankind, the creature who exists upon black-mail. Lady Blanche. I have resolved upon asking for this large sum of money from you, who can spare it so well, that I may be able to leave England forever. When I say forever, I mean what I say to the hilt; I shall never return. The twenty thousand pounds properly invested will produce an income which will enable me to live in ease and luxury on the Continent. If I had asked for a smaller sum I should have been compelled to come to you again, not once or twice, but continually; that would not have been pleasant for either you or me."

Lady Blanche flushed, and bit her white lip.

"No! Very unpleasant, rather. Therefore, I have asked for this sum in a lump. As I say, I shall leave England; you will never see me again, unless you chance to meet me by accident in one of your continental trips—perchance on your honey-moon with Lord Norman—"

A fierce flush dyed Lady Blanche's face as she looked up and saw the sardonic smile in his eyes.

"You will be relieved of all dread of black-mail, and may, if you please, forget that such a person as Oscar Raymond ever existed. In time, I have no doubt, you will be able to convince yourself that the little comedy we enacted in the house yonder was never performed, excepting in your fevered imagination. At any rate, if you cannot forget me, it will be agreeable to reflect that I shall never put myself in evidence against you—"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"I am not afraid of that," she said. "You may have sunk as low—you may be what you are now, but you were once a gentleman—"

"And once a gentleman, always a gentleman," he finished for her, with a very soft laugh.

"But if I do not fear you, I have still to deal with your assistant—Josine!" said Lady Blanche.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Josine will give you no trouble, Lady Blanche," he said, with quiet confidence. "She will invest her two thousand pounds in a husband and some comfortable *café* in the region of Leicester Square, and will settle down into entire oblivion of Ballyfloe and all that occurred there. Besides, I think Josine has too wholesome a fear of your humble servant to ever dream of betraying us."

There were a few moments of silence, then Lady Blanche looked down upon him.

"You shall have the money you ask for," she said, gravely. "How shall I give it to you? I do not know how I can draw so large an amount from the bank without attracting some attention and remark."

"Draw two checks for ten thousand each," he said, coldly; "and if any remark is made, say that you are buying jewelry."

She inclined her head.

"If you will please send them to this address," he said, handing her a slip of paper—it was the name of a large London hotel—I will wait until I receive them, and then leave

England at once; so that, Lady Blanche, we may say farewell."

He came close to the balustrade, and held up his smooth, white hand, and Lady Blanche touched it with her finger tips.

Some impulse, too strong to be resisted, prompted her to say, in a very sudden whisper:

"You have no remorse, then, for what you have done?"

He smiled up at her, a smile of perfect calmness and repose.

"Remorse! Certainly not; only the supremest satisfaction. For the first time for months I feel at ease—as if my self-love had been avenged and satisfied. Oh, you mean on that young lady's account!" he added, and he laughed softly. "No, no remorse on her account either. She is too young to feel deeply; she will get over this little disappointment very quickly. Josine tells me that she is good-looking; I may presume that she is beautiful."

"You saw her," murmured Lady Blanche.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"For a moment; I did not notice her particularly, and I do not think I should know her if I met her. Well, she is beautiful, and will soon get another lover. What is love? 'Men have died, and worms have eaten them,' as Shakespeare says, 'but not of love.' As for Lord Norman"—and his face darkened—"he and I are quits, more than quits, for the ballance is in my favor, I think. Good-night, Lady Blanche—farewell! I wish you every happiness!"

And raising his hat, he disappeared in the dimness of the night.

Lady Blanche shuddered as if a chill had passed over her.

"Bad men's blessings are good men's curses," says the Spanish proverb, and she felt as if she had been banned.

Drawing her shawl around her she went into the house, and the first person her gaze fell upon was Lady Betty, sitting pale and anxious over the fire, her hands clasped, her brows knitted.

She looked up as Lady Blanche entered, and tried to smile, but there were traces of tears in her eyes, and a most cruel triumph filled Lady Blanche's heart.

"This woman," she thought, "triumphed over me a short time ago. She helped Floris Carlisle to rob me of my lover. Now it is my hour to triumph. They are parted forever, and I shall win him back."

With this flow of unholy satisfaction within her bosom, she went to bed and slept the sleep of an innocent child, for the simple reason that the awful excitement she had undergone had resulted in complete exhaustion.

The morrow came, and Lady Blanche glided down to the breakfast-room.

There were half a dozen persons at the table, and Lady Betty among them.

She looked pale, and anxious, and worried, but she flushed as Lady Blanche came up to her and greeted her with a sweet, sympathetic smile.

"Have you heard from Miss Carlisle?" she asked.

Lady Betty shook her head. It seemed as if she could scarcely find courage to say "No."

"Really!" murmured Lady Blanche, with well-feigned surprise. "How very strange!"

"No, it is not strange at all!" retorted Lady Betty. "I did not expect to hear until to-night. She—she may not have had time to write yet."

"I should have thought she would have sent a post-card," suggested Lady Blanche, smoothly. "We all are very curious and anxious, but not so anxious as you, I dare say, my dear!"

"No," retorted Lady Betty; "I dare say not!"

A few minutes afterward she rose and went to her room.

Josine was standing with an open letter in her hand, and wiping her eyes.

"What's the matter now?" asked Lady Betty, irritably.

"Oh, miladi, I have had bad news. My only brother, miladi! And I have not seen him for years!"

"Oh, said Lady Betty. "And of course you want to go at once, is that it?"

Josine looked hurt and wounded.

"Ah, no, miladi, not at once. I would not be so ungrateful as to leave you so suddenly. I have written to tell them to let me know if he gets worse. If he doesn't I shall not want to go, but if he does—" and she sobbed.

"Very well," said Lady Betty. "I hope for your sake as well as mine that he will get better."

Josine dropped a courtesy.

"And—and—may I ask what news miladi has had from Mademoiselle Carlisle? Pardon, miladi, if I presume too much."

It is scarcely necessary to say that she had very carefully examined the letter-bag.

"There is no news," said Lady Betty, with a sigh.

Josine held up her hands with an expression of dismay and shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah, but that is bad!" she muttered between her teeth.

"Hold your long tongue!" exclaimed Lady Betty, peremptorily, "and leave the room."

The morning wore away. Some of the party went out riding, others played tennis or wandered about the grounds, but on all there seemed to rest a cloud as of expectation and disquietude, and everybody looked forward to the return of the hunting expedition.

A heavy weight hung upon Lady Betty's spirits, and she seemed to count the hours that must elapse before she must see Bruce and tell him of Floris's sudden disappearance.

Luncheon came and went, and the dinner hour approached.

If the hunting-party made good traveling it would return before dusk, and Lady Betty was standing on the terrace looking toward the road that wound through the park when she saw a horseman appear in the distance.

He was riding very hard and evidently urging his tired horse at its utmost speed.

Her heart misgave her, she knew not why, and, like most women of her temperament, she looked around for help and company; and at the moment, as if she, too had been watching—as indeed she had—Lady Blanche glided through the window and stood by her side.

"Who is that coming?" said Lady Betty, in an agitated voice.

"It is some messenger," she said, very quietly.

"Something happened!" gasped Lady Betty.

Lady Blanche smiled contemptuously.

"Why should you think so?" she said. "Sir Joseph has sent one of the men on in advance to tell them to put off the dinner for an hour—that is all."

Lady Betty tried to smile.

"I wish I had your nerves, Blanche," she said, almost spitefully.

"It isn't a question of nerves, but of common sense," retorted Lady Blanche, coldly. "What could have happened?"

"I don't know · we shall soon learn," answered Lady Betty, grimly.

The man rode fearfully hard, and soon passed into the road leading to the house; and they saw that the horse was covered with foam and nearly exhausted.

One or two others, attracted and alarmed by the sight of the horse, had joined them on the terrace, and as the man rode up and flung himself out of the saddle almost at their feet, one of the gentlemen ran down the steps to him.

It was Donald.

"A letter for Lady Pendleton," he said, hoarsely; he was as nearly exhausted as the poor beast he had ridden.

"Give it to me!" exclaimed Lady Betty, snatching it.

The rest drew away from her, all but Lady Blanche, who remained where she stood at her side.

Lady Betty tore the envelope open, and glanced at the scrap of paper inside, then staggered against the balustrade, with a faint cry.

Lady Blanche, without the slightest hesitation, took the letter from her hand and read it.

She did not stagger as Lady Betty had done; no cry escaped her lips; but they all noticed that she turned white to the lips, a deadly white, awful to see and remember.

For a moment only, then she looked around, and in a low, tended and fixed firmly on vacancy, her fingers clutching the scrap of paper.

For a moment she stood as if turned to stone, her eyes dis- hard voice, so unlike her usual smooth tones, said:

"Lord Norman has met with an accident; he is in great danger!"

There was a murmur of alarm and sympathy, as the group gathered around Lady Blanche.

With a piteous cry, Lady Betty held out her hand.

"Give me the letter! Oh, what shall I do? Poor Bruce! Poor Bruce! I can't read it!" she sobbed. "Will some one—"

One of the gentlemen took it from her trembling hand and read it aloud.

Sir Joseph had written a few lines only, saying that Lord Norman had met with a serious accident, and that one or both of the medical men who were staying in the house was to come on to Scarfross with the necessary things.

He added in a postscript: "I need not exhort you to be careful not to alarm Miss Carlisle!"

As those words were read out, Lady Betty groaned and put her hands before her face.

"Oh! what is to be done?" she wailed. "Do you think he is killed?—no, not killed, or they would not send for a doctor! Where is Doctor Greene?"

Some one set off to find the young doctor, who was playing tennis, and came bounding on to the terrace alert and ready-witted.

"What is to be done?" panted Lady Betty, who, like most of her class, was thrown into a complete state of helpless despair.

Suddenly a shiver ran through Lady Blanche's frame, and, as if she had recovered from an awful stupor, she turned to Doctor Greene.

"There is no time to lose," she said, in a low, hard voice. "Will you start at once, Doctor Greene? I will see that a conveyance follows you with anything you may order."

He glanced at her white, set face approvingly.

"I will write a list of what I shall require," he said. Then, as he turned to hurry away, he stopped and looked around. "This Scarfross is a mere hut, quite solitary in the hills, is it not—I mean there is not likely to be any women-folk, who could nurse Lord Norman?"

"It is simply a rough, hut-like place, in a perfect wilderness," some one quickly answered.

"Very well, then," he said, decisively; "some one you can rely upon had better come on after me in the carriage," he said, and ran off.

Lady Blanche stood for a moment, as if collecting all her mental and physical strength; then she went down the terrace and around to the stables.

There she found a couple of grooms wiping down Donald's poor horse, and trying to make him comfortable; and, seated on an upturned barrow, with a noggin of the best whiskey in his hand, was Donald himself.

The appearance of the "grand lady" in their midst flustered the men somewhat. She went up to Donald quickly.

"Will you tell me how the accident happened?" she asked.

Donald took off his glengarry, and told her in his rough, guttural, broken English:

"It was all for the lad's sake, me leddie; he gave his life—if so be the laird dies—for the young boy! Poor boy; he's almost daft over it, and well-nigh broken-hearted! It was a noble thing to do, me leddie, and a sore sight to see so grand a man lying broken and bleeding. It's a strange thing, too, me leddie, that Lord Bruce had a warning the night before. He could not sleep, and came to me to know if he could ride back here. Strange that were, now!" and Donald shook his head gravely, feeling convinced that Lord Bruce had received a direct "warning."

Lad Blanche listened with lowered lids and tightly-set lips.

"And—and do you think he will die?" she asked, hoarsely, each word leaving her white lips as if it hurt her.

Donald shook his head and took up his whiskey.

"He's sort hurt," he said, grimly.

Lady Blanche put her hand to her heart as if she had received a dagger thrust; then she looked at the old man's rugged face with a fixed determination.

"Donald," she said, "a doctor—Doctor Greene—is going to ride out to Scarfross at once, and a carriage is to follow. Will you see about the horses? And, Donald, will you see that a lady's saddle is put upon one?"

"And what for?" he demanded, staring at her.

"For me," she said, gently.

"For the leddies!" he exclaimed. "But it's no possible you'll be thinking of riding through the dark night to Scarfross—"

"I am not only thinking of it, but I mean to do it," she said, calmly. "I am a good rider, and strong," she said. "If Doctor Greene can go, I can go! The night is not dark. Lord Norman is lying there without a woman near him—"

"Say no more, leddie," said the old man, doggedly. "I'll saddle a horse for ye, and what's more, I will ride back to Scarfross, too."

Lady Blanche went back to the house without a word, and reaching her room, threw herself on her knees beside the bed and hid her face in her hands.

And this was her triumph, was it? It was for this that she had plotted and schemed, that the man she loved should be dying, dying out in a hut in the wilderness. Dying!

Oh, Heaven, if he should die before she could reach him, before she could see his face, touch his hand once more!

With a cry of despair she rose and began putting on her habit with feverish haste.

She had scarcely got it on than there came a knock at the door, and Lady Betty entered the room without ceremony.

She was dressed for the journey, and was still trembling with agitation.

"Have you ordered the carriage, Blanche—" she said, then she stopped short and stared at her. "Why have you got your habit on? Where are you going?"

"I am going to Scarfross," said Lady Blanche, coldly.

"To Scarfross? Why?" demanded Lady Betty. "Why should you go?"

"Because it pleases me," returned Lady Blanche, haughtily, but with a dangerous gleam in her eyes.

Lady Betty looked at her jealously.

"There is no occasion for you to go," she said. "I am going—"

"What is that to me?" said Lady Blanche, turning on her suddenly, with white face and flashing eyes. "What is it to me whether you are going or not? I am going!"

"But you cannot ride—in the night!" said Lady Betty. "Why not come in the carriage?"

"In the carriage!" scornfully. "Do you know how long it will take? Do you think I should keep sane while it dragged its way along! No, I am going to ride. I would walk if there was no other way. What is it to me who else is going? I am nearest him—"

Lady Betty's eyes filled.

"You forget Floris, Blanche," she said, kindly.

Lady Blanche winced as if she had been struck, then her face crimsoned and her lips parted as if for sudden breath.

"Floris—Floris Carlisle!" she said, with suppressed scorn and vehemence. "Yes, she may be nearer to him than I am! You taunt me with that, do you! Where is she, then? Why is she not here? Perhaps you do not know—but, yes, you do, as well as I! She has deserted him! And it is I—I who have loved him all through—who go to him now!"

And speechless—for what could she say?—Lady Betty crept crying from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

LINKED WITH THE PAST.

In the little drawing-room of the cottage at Westbury Floris sat, with her head bowed upon her hands, looking into the fire.

A silence that could be felt brooded over the house; the old clock on the stairs, whose tick she could remember as far back as she could remember anything, even that had been hushed by sympathetic hands.

Motionless as a carved figure she sat, the fire-light falling fitfully on her pale face, showing like marble over the deep-black dress.

A week had passed since she left Ballyfloe and that long night journey, and she was now alone in the world.

To the poor, weak, tired mother the long day of peace and rest had come, and the girl who at this moment needed her more sorely than she had ever needed her was motherless and solitary.

Alone—alone!

All day long the word seemed to echo dully in her benumbed heart, until she longed, like the Psalmist of old, for the white wings of death to bear her to her mother's side.

And yet friends had been very good to her—the friends of her old, past, girlish life had done their very best, but how poor is the very best that can be done in such an hour!

No sympathy, however tender and thoughtful, can lighten the darkness of the hour of bereavement, or take off the keen edge of the great trouble.

One gleam of consolation alone pierced the gloom, and that was the knowledge that she had been in time to see the poor mother before she died—in time to hear her very last words and receive her last blessing.

There had scarcely been time for more than that, and Mrs. Carlisle had died in the full comforting assurance that she should leave Floris with a happy future before her.

Almost her last words had been of Lord Bruce, and her belief that he would make Floris happy; almost her last thoughts had been of the glorious future that awaited her as Countess of Norman.

And Floris could not summon heart to tell her the truth—

could not find strength to destroy the comfort the poor, dying woman drew from the conviction that her child would be provided for.

And now, as she sat looking into the fire with dry, burning eyes, Floris was thinking of him and the brief, happy past.

Through all the week she had been expecting some word from him.

It could not be anything that would not add to her misery, for what could he say that would explain away what she had seen that fateful morning?

But still she had expected and longed for it.

She had thought that he would write one line, perhaps, admitting his guilt and imploring her forgiveness; and she would have sent him her pardon and wished him all happiness.

But no line had come—no, not a single word.

If he had died—if they both had died—the silence between them could not have been more complete!

There was no friendly spirit to tell her that in that moment he was lying between life and death in the vast solitude of the hills, unconscious of anything—ignorant of all that happened to her and to himself!

To her his conduct seemed black as night, black as the sorrow that had befallen her; and in her heart echoed the dreary word, "alone!"

So she sat in the red fire-light, letting the hours slip by with weary feet, so lost to the world that when the servant stole in with hushed footsteps and spoke to her she did not hear her.

The girl came up and touched her with pitying respect.

"A gentleman—Mr. Morrel, miss," she said.

And Mr. Morrel came in.

Floris rose to receive him, and held out her white hand.

The little lawyer took it and looked at her with a sympathetic pity, which was so strange an emotion to him that it made him quite embarrassed.

It is to be presumed that even middle-aged attorneys retain a sense of the beautiful, and the lovely young face, never lovelier than now in its clear pallor, and with the sad, wistful light in the eloquent eyes, touched him deeply.

"I am sorry to intrude at so late an hour, Miss Carlisle," he began; but Floris stopped him with a faint smile.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Morrel. I was getting very—lonely."

"Yes, yes," he said, in his old, sharp way. How well Floris remembered it on the occasion when he came with Lord Norman's offer. "No doubt—dreadful loss."

"For me, yes," said Floris, bravely, and with a steadfast look in her eyes; "but not for—for—my mother. You were a kind friend to her, Mr. Morrel," she added, with that gentle sweetness which atoned for much of her pride, and was the secret charm which bewitched all who came in contact with her.

"No, no; all in the way of business, Miss Carlisle; nothing more, I assure you," he responded, hurriedly. "Always found your poor mother anxious to avoid giving trouble and—and—might I ring for a light for you?"

"Thanks," said Floris. She had grown so used to the grim darkness that had surrounded her that she had become enamored of it. The girl brought the lamp, and Mr. Morrel sat down and fidgeted with his gloves. Out of respect for Floris he was dressed in mourning and had thought fit to don a hat-band which would have been considered deep enough for the loss of his own father.

Floris had asked for some tea, and she gave him a cup now as simply and quietly, almost as cheerfully, as she had done months ago.

There are some proud natures who, like the Spartan boy, will hide the fox that gnaws at their heart, and Floris was one of them.

"Will you take some more sugar? I am sorry there is no cream."

"Don't mention it, Miss Carlisle," he said. Her fortitude amazed him, and pleased him, too, for he was going to try it to its utmost. "When I was here last, Miss Carlisle," he said, coughing and aheming, "I promised to look into the late Mrs. Carlisle's affairs, and—ahem!—I have done so."

"Yes?" said Floris. She had sunk into the easy-chair and sat looking at him, her lovely eyes dreamily fixed on his dry, wrinkled, and not unkindly face. "Yes, you have been very kind, Mr. Morrel; I do not know what I should have done without you."

"Not at all, not at all!" he said, waving his hand, deprecatingly. "All in the way of business, miss. Only did my duty. I was your father's legal adviser before you were born; in fact, I have had the Carlisle business in my hands ever since I entered the glorious profession of the law."

Floris inclined her head; though her eyes were fixed on his, her thoughts were wandering miles away—to Ballyfloe, to Lady Betty, to Bruce—ah, yes, to Bruce!

"I don't suppose any one knew more of the great lawsuit, Norman *vs.* Carlisle, than I did," he went on, sipping his tea. "A wonderful lawsuit—and wonderfully—most romantically concluded," and he bowed to Floris.

Her face flushed for a moment at the name of "Norman," then went pale again. Romantically concuded indeed! If he could but have guessed how romantically, even the dry, old lawyer as he was would not have been so complacent.

"But to return to the business in hand," he said, with a little cough. "I have been going into the late Mrs. Carlisle's affairs, and I am sorry to say that they have not proved as satisfactory as I could desire—no, not nearly as satisfactory," and he shook his head.

Floris turned her sad, wistful eyes upon him for a moment. She had no idea as to where his words were drifting.

Since her mother's death there had been one or two interviews, in each of which he had talked and she had listened, but understanding little or nothing.

"I am very sorry," she said, more for his sake than her own.

"Yes, so am I. I had hoped that, upon examination, the estate would have come out pretty flourishing. It was rather a confused and tangled business—the lawsuit had entailed a great loss, and there were several mortgages; but I had hoped that we should have been able to clear them off—I am afraid I don't make myself plain," he broke off, for Floris's gaze had settled on the fire again, with a far-off expression.

"I—I beg your pardon," she said, meekly. "Yes, I understand. You mean that I am not as—rich as you thought I should be?"

He looked at her curiously.

"Exactly, that is what I was trying to convey, Miss Carlisle. The estate had been so much encumbered and entangled that your mother scarcely knew how she really stood."

"Poor mamma!" murmured Floris, slowly.

"And having gone into matters I find that the prospect is not nearly so inviting as it should be," he continued, smoothing out his gloves and frowning at the tea-cup.

Floris watched him with listless attention.

"To add to our difficulties," he resumed, having arranged his gloves to his satisfaction, "the principal mortgagee has chosen this particular time to foreclose. He could not have chosen a worse, because property is at a very low ebb in the market, and a sale would not do more than realize a half of the money lent. I am afraid I scarcely make myself understood?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" said Floris, calmly.

But in truth she did not realize all that his legal phraseology implied.

"I have endeavored to persuade him, the principal mortgagee, to waive his claim to foreclosure, but I have not succeeded. He wants the money, and in simple language, Miss Carlisle, he must have it."

"Yes, oh, yes!" said Floris again.

"Therefore it will be necessary, indeed, inevitable, that the estate should be sold."

"Yes," said Floris. "Please sell it all—all but the cottage. I would like to keep this and live here."

Poor Mr. Morrel coughed and knitted his brows.

They say that lawyers always dread having dealings with female clients, they are so long in understanding exactly how the land lies, and certainly Floris was long in understanding,

"But, my dear Miss Carlisle," he said, leaning forward, "I'm afraid this cottage must be sold."

It had come at last!

Floris sat up and looked at him.

"The cottage must be sold? But—but, Mr. Morrel, I wish to live here. I wish to live here as—as my mother did!"

He frowned and brushed an imaginary crumb from his coat sleeve.

"I am very sorry, but I am afraid this cottage must be sold, Miss Carlisle. Of course, I am not aware that, placed as you are, this is merely a matter of arrangement. You are to be, if you are not now, the possessor of immense wealth, and can buy the cottage for yourself."

"I don't understand," said Floris, slowly.

Mr. Morrel grew desperate.

"In one word, Miss Carlisle, we find that your mother's estate, if sold, will barely pay off the mortgage upon it, and —and that if you were not betrothed to Lord Norman you would be penniless."

Floris rose, white and calm, dreadfully calm.

"What! What did you say?" she asked, very quietly.

Mr. Morrel, driven into a corner, pulled himself together.

"That is the simple English of it, Miss Carlisle," he said.

"We find that the liens on the estate are so great that to meet them everything must be sacrificed."

Floris stood, leaning her hand on the table.

"But—but there is my own money!" she said, faintly.

Mr Morrel wagged his head.

It was certainly hard work having to do business with a lady, and a young one, especially.

"You forget, Miss Carlisle, that your own little fortune went in paying the costs of the last lawsuit between you and Lord Norman," he replied.

She shuddered at sound of the name.

"Then—then I am penniless?" she said.

He smiled.

"Well, yes, if you put it as bluntly as that, you are," he said. "But," and he smiled unctuously, with quiet enjoyment, "that is a small matter to the future Countess of Norman!"

Floris turned deathly pale, but her eyes never left his face.

"Mr. Morrel," she said, quietly and calmly, "you are laboring under a misapprehension. I am not the future Countess of Norman."

"Not—not—not the future—but, my dear Miss Carlisle, all the world knows of your engagement!"

"All the world knew it, perhaps," said Floris, steadily, though her eyes wavered and her lips quivered. "But not all the world, it seems, knows that the engagement is broken off."

"Broken off!" he exclaimed, staring through his spectacles aghast at her words. "Do you mean to say, Miss Carlisle, that you are not engaged to marry Lord Norman?"

Floris shook her head. His amazement and consternation almost amused her.

"Yes," she said, "the—the engagement is broken off, Mr. Morrel. You must not take Lord Norman into your calculations."

"But that is just what I have been doing!" he said, stolidly. "I was under the impression that you were betrothed to the earl, and that—that in short—good heavens, my dear young lady, how did this happen?" and the poor man rubbed his knees in a state as nearly approaching agitation as a lawyer permits himself.

In her despair and misery Floris laughed, actually laughed.

"What does it matter?" she said. "Results are all you lawyers care for, Mr. Morrel, and I have given you the result. There is no engagement between Lord Norman and myself. It ceased before—before my mother's death."

"Great Heaven!" he exclaimed. "Dear me! good gracious! Then—then you are actually penniless!"

She smiled.

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, so calmly that he stared at her. "It sounds very dreadful, but I suppose it is not so bad as it sounds."

He was silent for a moment, then he said, almost to himself:

"Lord Norman would refund her private fortune."

She heard him and turned upon him almost fiercely.

"Mr. Morrel, let us understand each other," she said. "If you think of asking any favor from Lord Norman, cast aside the idea at once. I would rather die than accept a crust of bread from him!" her voice grew thick and heavy. "Put all thought of Lord Norman out of your mind. Think of me as simply Floris Carlisle; penniless, if you like—but beholden to no man."

He looked at her as she stood erect in front of the fire, and his thoughts went back to the evening long ago when she had written her note of defiance to Lord Norman's offer.

He shook his head.

"Think what might be done in that quarter," he commenced, but she interrupted him.

"Mr. Morrel, you are my lawyer, not his—"

"Certainly."

"Then I forbid you—forbid you, remember—to communicate with him. Let happen what may; let them sell the house over my head—the very chair I have sat upon; let them do what they will and can, but do not think I will permit you to apply to Lord Norman!"

"My dear young lady," he pleaded—"a lovers' quarrel?"

"Yes," she said, with a wild, despairing smile, "it is a lovers' quarrel, if you like, Mr. Morrel; but it will last a lifetime!"

The poor man did not know what to say or do.

He had been comforting himself with the reflection that although the Carlisle estate had disappeared, it mattered little, seeing that she was to marry Lord Norman and become Countess of Norman; and now she had said that it was not to be.

He got up as bewildered and flushed as ever he had been in his life.

"May I ask, Miss Carlisle," he said, "what you intend to do?"

She looked at him vaguely.

"I do not know yet," she said, speaking as bravely as she could; "but I will let you know as soon as I know myself. At any rate, I must leave here," and she looked round with a sigh.

Mr. Morrel drew a long breath.

"Miss Carlisle," he said, "I am an old man, or nearly so, and—and I have no one to consider but myself. If—if you will allow me to offer you any assistance—I have been connected with your family for many years, and have reaped substantial benefit from the connection—I say if you will allow me to offer you—"

Floris put out her hand. For the first time her eyes filled with tears.

"No, no!" she said. "I—I cannot accept that. I am young and strong—oh, I am very strong!—and I can fight my own way. There are so many things a woman can do now, and I shall find something. But I am very grateful—very. I—I—will you go now, please? I am feeling tired and upset."

He took up his hat and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Miss Carlisle. I should feel very much obliged if you would write to me if you want any assistance. I—er—bless my soul, this is very sad!" and blowing his nose he got out of the house.

When one is suffering from two such sorrows as had befallen Floris, one does not think much of a third. It would seem as if the human soul were capable of so much misery and no more; and that when the limit has been passed all that happens afterward is borne in a happy-go-lucky frame of mind that may be despair or the indifference of actual exhaustion.

Floris had thought that she would be permitted to live on the rest of her life in the seclusion of the cottage; but if it was not to be, well, it was not to be, and there was an end of it.

The wide world lay before her, helpless and friendless, and she faced it with a touch of the old pride of self-reliance which had always distinguished her.

Over the falseness of her lover and the death of her mother she had shed many tears, but over the loss of her money she had scarcely expended a sigh.

Mr Morrel, who came down almost daily, was astonished at the calmness she displayed.

Over and over again he begged her to try and think if there was not some friend to whom she could apply for help, some relation to whom she could go; but Floris always shook her head with a faint smile.

"I have no one to whom I could apply," she said. "As to friends—" she thought of Lady Betty with a sigh.

She could not go to her. She could not hold any communication with her, for if she did so she might be brought in contact with Lord Norman, and that would be worse than death by starvation. There were friends in Worthing, old friends of her mother, who would have helped her, but Floris had persistently refused to see them. They were all dying of curiosity to know why the engagement had been broken off, and they would ask questions and torture her beyond endurance.

"No," she told him, "there was no friend of whom she could ask assistance."

"I think you are very—excuse me, Miss Carlisle—very proud!" said poor Mr. Morrel, in despair, and Floris had looked at him absently.

"Am I?" she said, with the same faint smile. "Perhaps I am. I used to be proud, at least they used to call me so, and perhaps I am so still. But I am not afraid; I am young and strong, and there must be something in the big world for me to do."

"Yes," he assented. "You are young—I don't know about strong, and you are—" he was going to say "beautiful," but he stopped himself in time with a dry little cough.

"I cannot go as a companion again," said Floris, with a trace of sudden color on her face. "They would want references, and I cannot give those."

The lawyer looked distressed. He knew nothing of what had happened up in the Highlands; something dreadful it must have been, he thought, to bring about so sudden and complete a separation between her and Lord Norman, and to make her so determined to hold no communication with her recent friends.

"I don't see what you are to do; indeed I don't," he said, in sad perplexity.

"There must be something," responded Floris.

"If you only allow me to be your banker—" he stammered—"I mean until brighter days—"

But Floris shook her head.

"No, no," she said. "I can not do that. You know I can not; though I am very, very grateful. If—if I could find some work out of England," she murmured.

The little lawyer caught at once at the suggestion.

"But why out of England, my dear young lady?" he asked.

Floris's eyes drooped, and her lips quivered.

"Because I would like to leave England—forever, if I could," she said, quietly. "How long may I remain here—at the cottage, I mean?"

"Only a fortnight at the utmost," he said reluctantly.

"So soon?" she said, sadly.

"You could remain altogether, if you liked," he responded. "If you would allow me, I should be glad to purchase the cottage and—and advance you enough money to start a school. I am sure"—with something approaching eagerness—"that you would soon be able to repay me."

But Floris shook her head as decidedly as ever.

"You must not think of that, Mr. Morrel. Even if I could accept your kindness, it would be thrown away; I am not cut out for a school-mistress. I don't know enough to teach half the things girls require nowadays. Besides—no; I could not do that. There must be something else, surely. Do you think—I know how good you are, and how anxious you are to help me—do you think I could see some of the foreign newspapers? There might be an advertisement which I could answer."

Mr. Morrel nodded almost energetically, and seized on the idea eagerly. At each visit he had become more interested in the beautiful young girl who seemed so friendless and helpless in the midst of her sorrow.

Only a fortnight! It was not long in which to find a niche for herself—a few feet of standing room in this vast world, so crowded and jostled!

A week passed, during which she did not go outside the house, excepting into the garden, in which she walked with drooping head and listless step, thinking over the past, which seemed so long ago and yet was so recent.

People called, people who would have been glad to help her, but she shrunk from seeing them, and they were told one and all by the little servant that Miss Carlisle was too unwell to see any one.

At the end of the week Mr Morrel came down, and Floris saw by his face that he had something to communicate.

He put a small bundle of papers on the table as she shook hands, and nodded curtly, as he scrutinized her face through his glasses.

"You are looking better, Miss Carlisle," he said, in his sharp fashion. "That's right! I was almost afraid to come down, your pale face so—so upset me! But there, we'll hope things are taking a turn, eh? You are still resolved to go out and seek your fortune, like a female Whittington?" and he smiled.

"I don't want to be a Lord Mayor of London, if that is what you mean!" she said; and there was a touch of her old *naiveté* in the reply that made him laugh and nod with satisfaction.

"Very good, very good, indeed! Well, if you are still resolved, I think I have heard of something that might suit you."

And he began to untie the tape around his bundle.

Floris's face flushed slightly; hope, which springs eternal in the human breast, came to her.

"It was a very curious thing," he said, sorting his papers methodically; "but life is made up of curious things. Talk of fiction being stranger than reality! It's downright nonsense! I assure you, my dear Miss Carlisle, that a lawyer meets with far stranger things in the course of his professional experience than any of you young ladies read of in your novels."

"I dare say," said Floris, smiling. "Have you discovered that I am the long-lost daughter of an earl who is longing to claim me, or has an uncle in the East Indies, of whom I have never heard, left me an enormous fortune?"

He laughed; he was immensely pleased to see her in this frame of mind, little guessing how much of it was really affected so that his kind heart should not be distressed by the continual spectacle of her sorrow.

"No, no!" he said, "I wish it was. But this is what it is. By the way, do you know anything about flowers?"

Floris opened her great, sorrowful eyes with faint astonishment.

"Botany and that kind of thing?" he explained.

Floris shook her head.

"No; I am afraid not."

"Hem!" he muttered, rather discouraged; then he brightened up again.

"But that doesn't matter, I think," he said, briskly. "After all, you could soon learn—"

"Learn botany, the science of flowers!" exclaimed Floris almost inclined to think that the incessant worry on her behalf had turned the little man's brain.

"Yes," he said, slowly; "why not? Nothing very difficult in it, I should think, for a clever young lady like yourself."

"I am about the stupidest girl, Mr. Morrel, that ever your professional experience ever met with," she said, with a smile.

He smiled and chuckled.

"I don't believe there is anything you couldn't learn," he said, confidently.

"You haven't told me why you asked me if I understood flowers," said Floris, gently, bringing him back to the point.

"This is the reason," he said, settling himself in his chair. "When you spoke to me the other day of wanting to get out of England, and trusting there might be some advertisements in the foreign newspapers, I thought there was a good idea in the suggestion, so I went to a friend in London, who knows all about the Continent and speaks half a dozen languages, and got him to hunt through some of the papers." And he laid his hand on the bundle on the table. "Well, my friend sent me around one or two advertisements that he thought might suit, and I looked over them. Most of them were for English governesses. I didn't think they would suit you."

Floris sighed.

"I am so fearfully ignorant!" she said.

"Exactly—no, no, I don't mean that! Well, there was one that was not for a governess, but a very strange advertisement. I'll read it to you."

He took up the paper and read aloud:

"'Wanted, an English lady to assist a lady in the preparation of a book on botany and the management of rare flowers.'

"The advertiser requires a good copyist, and not necessarily a lady fully acquainted with botany. Address X. Y., Florence."

Floris's heart sunk, and she sighed.

"Now wait a moment," he said, holding up his hand. "I thought it might suit you, so I wrote and got particulars before I troubled you with it."

Floris's eyes glanced upon him gratefully.

"And the particulars were satisfactory. Here they are," and he took up a letter and read it.

"You see she wants a young lady, a lady by birth, and she is more particular about that, and that the young lady should write a good hand, than that she should be skilled in plants. Now you are a lady by birth, Miss Carlisle, and if you will allow me to say so, you write a remarkable hand."

"Well?" said Floris, eagerly.

"Well, I wrote and told her so, and asked for more particulars and references, of course. The references came, and I found them extremely satisfactory. I then gave her some few particulars respecting yourself, and, in short, I accepted the situation for you on condition of your agreement. The salary is not a large one, but there will be a comfortable home, and Florence is a beautiful place, I am told. Never was out of England myself, and don't want to be!" he jerked in; "but still, it's a beautiful place, and as most ladies are fond of flowers, why—"

Floris's eyes filled.

"You have been very good to me, Mr. Morrel. When you asked me the other day whether I had any friends, I ought to have replied, 'Yes; one very, very kind and true one!' And have you really got the situation for me?"

"Yes," he said, huskily; "that is, if you like to take it. You shall look over the papers and decide. The work will not be hard; you will have to do some copying and write from dictation—I should buy a work on botany and study it on the journey, if I were you—and from what I hear, I think you would find Mrs. Sinclair a very nice lady. Now don't say a word, but look over the letters while I take a cup of tea."

Floris took the letters to a side-table and read them.

As Mr. Morrel had said, they were very satisfactory. The salary was not large, but ample for her poor wants, and there would be a comfortable home.

But the greatest attraction in the offer for her was the fact that, if she accepted, she could get away from England.

Florence, too! How often she had read of it and longed to see it! Florence! A pang shot through her heart for a moment, as she remembered that it was one of the places Lord Norman had often talked of taking her to when they were married—when they were married! Alas, alas!

Mr. Morrel, who was watching her, saw her lip quiver.

"There, there!" he said. "Don't think any more about it if you don't like the idea. Something else will be sure to turn up."

Floris rose and went up to him.

"Nothing could turn up better than this," she said.

"Then you will go?" he said.

She hesitated a moment.

"It's a long way from England," he said.

"Ah, that is the greatest inducement to me!" she responded. "Yes, I will go, Mr. Morrel."

And so, unconsciously, she drew the chain that bound her to the past a link closer.

All unknown to herself, and unguessed at, there awaited her at Florence the most eventful chapter of her life's history!

CHAPTER XXIII.

A BITTER PUNISHMENT.

It was an awful ride which Lady Blanche had undertaken and for the remainder of her life she remembered that night journey.

They reached the house, and at the sound of their approach, Sir Joseph came to the door. He started as his eyes fell on Lady Blanche, and he looked beyond her as if he expected to see some one else—Floris.

"Lady Blanche!" he said. "Have you come all this way—"

She fell rather than slipped from the sadle and caught his arm.

"Tell—tell me the truth!" she panted. "Is he—"

Her white face and suppressed emotion started him.

"Lord Norman, thank Heaven, is alive!" he answered, gravely.

Lady Blanche put her hands before her eyes and remained motionless for a moment, then she accepted Sir Joseph's arm and allowed him to lead her into the house.

"And you have ridden all this way in the dead of the night!" he said, scarcely yet realizing that it was really she who stood before him. "You must be wet through, Lady Blanche, and—and I am afraid there is no change of clothes; we have, unfortunately, no women-folk here."

She shook her head.

"It does not matter. No, I am not very wet. I do not care in the least. Sir Joseph, can I—can I see him? But of course, I can. I have come to nurse him."

Sir Joseph stared.

If any one should have come, it should have been Floris—the girl to whom he was engaged. His thought found expression.

"Have you told—how is Miss Carlisle? I trust the sad news has not made her ill?" he said.

Lady Blanche looked up wildly. She had almost forgotten Floris!

"We—we did not tell her," she said, coldly and distinctly. "We thought it better not to do so until—until we knew how Lord Norman really was. This is why I have come."

Sir Joseph felt surprised.

"You have not told her?" he said, gravely. "I am rather sorry; I think she ought to know. But perhaps she will follow with Lady Pendleton in the carriage?" he said.

"Perhaps so," assented Lady Blanche; "and now will you go and see if I may go to him, Sir Joseph? Doctor Greene may want me."

He went upstairs, and came down again after what seemed an age to her.

"Yes; Doctor Greene says you may see him; but he thinks you should have some rest."

She took off her hat and put it down with a gesture of refusal.

They entered the bed-room, and Lady Blanche, pressing her hand to her heart for a moment, unseen by Sir Joseph, glided to the bed. There lay Lord Norman, white to the lips—white as the bandage about his head, saving for the dark red scars on his forehead which the savage stag had caused.

Beside him stood Doctor Greene, and at a little distance the miserable boy whose inexperience and youthful impatience had been the cause of the accident.

Doctor Greene looked up as she approached, and scanned her face critically.

"Is—is he asleep?" she whispered, huskily.

"No," he said aloud; "you need not be afraid to speak, Lady Blanche; he is quite unconscious, and will remain so, I am afraid, for some time."

"Is he much hurt?" she asked, her eyes riveted on the white face.

"Very much," he said, concisely. "The stag did not spare him, poor fellow!"

"Is it dead?" she ground out between her teeth, with a sudden, savage flash of her eyes.

"Is it—the stag? I do not know."

"Yes," murmured Lord Harry, miserably, from the other end of the room.

She did not hear him, but stood with her eyes fixed on the motionless face, while she drew off her gloves.

"Sir Joseph tells me you wish to help me, Lady Blanche," said Doctor Greene. "Do you not think you had better rest for a while? Your journey has been an extraordinary one for a lady to undergo."

She shook her head.

"I could not rest. Tell me what I am to do?"

He inclined his head, seeing that any further remonstrance would be useless.

"Keep his bandages moist, please," he said. "I am going down-stairs to prepare fresh ones. Call me if he gives the slightest sign of returning consciousness."

As he left the room Lady Blanche sunk on her knees beside the bed, and let her head drop until her lips rested on Lord Norman's

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" she breathed. "You will not die! You must not die! No, Bruce, Bruce, live for my sake! My darling, my darling!"

Lord Harry stared at her with his bloodshot eyes, and, almost frightened by what he had seen, rose and stole out.

The morning broke, and the sun came sleepily through the mist, and the noon and evening passed, and still Lord Norman lay as dead to all around him as if indeed life had passed the portals of his white lips; and still Lady Blanche knelt down by his side.

Toward nightfall the carriage from Ballyfloe arrived.

It contained Lady Pendleton and a nurse, but to Sir Joseph's amazement, no Floris came.

"Have you told Miss Carlisle?" he asked, as he held Lady Betty's trembling hands, and tried to encourage her.

"No!" said Lady Betty, flushing and then turning pale again. "No; Miss Carlisle was summoned from Ballyfloe quite suddenly, before the news arrived!"

"Ah, that explains it!" he said, with a relieved air. "It is fortunate that it has happened so, though we may have to send for her. Now don't cry, Lady Betty. Doctor Greene does not withhold all hope; and we have got an excellent nurse in Lady Blanche."

Lady Betty flushed again, but before she could speak the door opened and Lady Blanche glided in.

Sir Joseph, thinking that he would be in the way, left them, and the two women confronted each other.

"You have come, then?" said Lady Blanche. "Where are the things you have brought?"

"The nurse has them?" said Lady Betty, coldly.

"The nurse!" echoed Lady Blanche. "Why did you bring one? I am the nurse, Lady Pendleton."

Lady Betty began to tremble.

"What right have you here?" she demanded. "Do you think Floris will be pleased when she hears—"

"Floris, Floris! I am sick of the name!" said Lady Blanche, with a curl of the lips. "Listen to me!" and she came quite close to the agitated woman. "Floris Carlisle is not here; she will not come here. You know why, as well or better than I do. Do you think because she has jilted and deserted him, that I should do so, too? Wait! I have come down because I have something to say to you. Remember, please, that I am Lord Norman's relative; that I am nearer to him than any Floris, jilt or no jilt, and that it is I—I, and no one else—who will tell him how she has deserted him! I will brook no interference from any one but Miss Carlisle, and do not expect to meet with any from her!" and, with a wave of the white hand, she swept noiselessly from the room.

The days passed; the little stone house, which had been built for pleasure, had become like a hospital.

On the evening of the fifth day, as Doctor Greene stood beside the window, looking out on the wild scene with a grave and anxious face, he heard Lady Blanche whisper his name, and turned noiselessly to the bed.

Lord Norman had opened his eyes and was looking at Lady Blanche with an expression of consciousness in them.

"Floris!" he breathed.

Even then she did not speak; but her hand stole along the bedclothes and inclosed his hot, wasted one.

"Floris! You here? What has happened? Ah! I remember," he added, with a faint effort to smile. "Is—is the boy safe?"

"Lord Harry is all right," said Doctor Greene. "He has gone home."

"Poor boy! I am glad of that. I am very tired! How long have I been lying here? The whole day?"

Doctor Greene drew a silk handkerchief across the feverish eyes.

"Don't talk now, Norman," he said. "Try and sleep. We will tell you all about it in the morning."

With a gesture of obedience he turned his head on the pillow, his hand still on Blanche's.

All night Lady Blanche sat with his hand in hers—hers which he thought was Floris's—and in the morning he awoke, with the fever far behind.

"Why, Blanche!" he said, feebly. "You here? Where is Floris? Has she gone to lie down?"

She inclined her head.

"I am glad of that. Poor girl! She must need some rest, surely. She has been watching beside me all night, hasn't she?"

Lady Blanche smoothed the bedclothes.

"Don't talk yet, Norman," she said, huskily.

"Blanche, how long have I been lying here?"

"Six days, Norman," she faltered.

"Six days! Six—and Floris has been watching all the time! My poor darling!" and the tears—he was still fearfully weak and easily moved—rose to his eyes. "Six days unconscious! And, of course, you all thought I was going to die? My own poor darling, how she must have suffered! Is she very ill, Blanche?"

Lady Blanche shook her head. She could not speak.

Every word he uttered went through her heart like a knife thrust.

"No? I am glad, glad, glad! But white and thin, Blanche, eh? Poor Floris! We must nurse her now, Blanche. My darling! Ah, Heaven, how I have longed to be able to speak to her! But though I knew she was here—though I knew she held my hand, and could feel her breath sometimes—I could not speak. I suppose I was half-unconscious, eh, Blanche?"

"Yes, dear!"

"Am I very much knocked about?"

She was silent.

"Oh, don't think I am anxious about my personal appearance," and he laughed weakly. "But am I too much knocked about to let her make it an excuse for putting off the wedding? I want to be married directly I can get about. Eh, Blanche?"

She nodded an assent and he went on:

"Yes, she won't refuse now. A sick man musn't be contradicted, that you know. How long has she been lying down? I wouldn't have her disturbed for the world, but I shall be so glad to see her. Doctor," turning his head, "do you think there is any fear of my going off my head again?"

"Not if we are careful not to excite you," said Doctor Greene, looking at Blanche, significantly.

Lord Norman laughed.

"Oh, you won't excite me," he said. "I have had enough in the way of excitement to outshine anything you can do in that line! I shall never forget seeing that mad boy rushing on to his death, as it seemed! Thank Heaven I was able to get up to his side in time! Poor boy! Gone home, has he? I must write to him as soon as I can—I'll get Floris to write to-day, and tell him I'm all right! When we are married he shall come and stay with us!"

He paused for want of breath, then fixed his eyes on Lady Blanche's face.

"Blanche, you are a good girl! You have been helping Floris to nurse me, eh? It is just like you! You look pale and tired; you have overdone yourself. When Floris comes back I shall tell her to send you away for the whole day."

She found her voice at last.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudibly, "When Floris comes back I will go away and rest. But—but she is more tired than I am, Bruce, and the doctor has ordered her to keep to her room."

"My poor darling!" he murmured, fervently. "Go to her, Blanche, and give her my love, will you? And tell her she is not to come to me on any account until she is quite rested," he added, wistfully.

Lady Blanche rose and supported herself by a chair for a moment, then she found strength to creep out of the room.

Her punishment was almost heavier than she could bear.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE UNDELIVERED MESSAGE.

Lady Betty was waiting for her in the sitting-room, waiting in the greatest agitation and distress, mingled with her joy for the news.

"Oh, Blanche, is he really better?" she exclaimed, forgetting her animosity for the moment.

"Yes," said Lady Blanche, curtly, "he is better; but his life hangs by a thread—I know that. I have come to ask you what you intend to do."

"To do?"

"Yes. Do you mean to see him? If you do, he will see by your face that something is wrong; he will ask you questions about—about Floris Carlisle. And what will you say? Can you keep your countenance and lie, as I have done? I have told him that she is resting."

"Oh, how could you do that?"

Lady Blanche laughed. It was an awful laugh, and it made her listener shudder.

"I would tell him anything to avert the blow! It must come sooner or later, but, unless you want to kill him, let it come later."

"It is dreadful!" moaned Lady Betty. "I can not understant it. I will never believe she has done what you say."

"Jilted him, and ran off with Bertie Clifforde?" said Lady Blanche, icily. "I admire your faith! I suppose you have written to her?"

"I wrote to her before I left Ballyfloe," said Lady Betty. "I wrote to Westbury, where her mother lived. I wrote to Matilda, who first recommended her to me when she came as a companion, but I have received no answer."

Lady Blanche smiled. She knew that Josine had taken the letters from the post-bag.

"How could you have received any answer, seeing that Floris Carlisle has gone with Bertie Clifforde, and that Lady Matilda is on the Continent?" she said, contemptuously.

"What shall I do?' demanded poor Lady Betty, helplessly.

"Go back to Ballyfloe," said Lady Blanche, firmly. "He does not know you are here. Go back to Ballyfloe, and I will tell him that you would not see him for fear of exciting him, and that you have taken Floris Carlisle with you."

"Yes, I will go," said Lady Betty. "I will go at once. Poor Bruce; poor Bruce!"

Lady Blanche's face flushed.

"Save your pity for those who need it," she said, quietly. "'Poor Bruce,' as you call him, is a fortunate man to have been deceived before marriage instead of afterward," and, with this last dagger-thrust, she left her.

From that moment Lord Norman's recovery was rapid. At the end of the week a comfortable, the most comfortable of the Ballyfloe traveling carriages, filled with every luxury a convalescent could require, arrived at Scarfross, and, to his immense satisfaction, he started for "home," as he called it.

They started early in the morning. Lord Lorman and the young doctor traveling in the big carriage, and the rest of the party traveling as best they liked.

They arrived at Ballyfloe at dusk, and were greeted by Lady and Sir Joseph Lynch with the most cordial and affectionate welcome. It was quite a reception, in fact, all the guests who remained thronging the terrace and pressing forward to express their delight at seeing him among them again.

Lord Norman, as he shook hands and responded to their kind expressions, kept glancing to the right and left and beyond them to the hall door, with barely suppressed eagerness.

"Where is Floris?" he asked, quite audibly, of Lady Lynch.

Before she could answer, Lady Blanche laid her hand softly on his arm.

"Bruce, Doctor Greene says you are to go in at once; the air is chilly for you."

He laughed grimly.

"You see, Lady Lynch, they intend to treat me as an invalid still, and I suppose I must bow beneath their tyranny! I shall see you at dinner."

"Better dine in your own room to-night, Norman, I think," said Doctor Greene. "You have done quite enough for to-day."

They escorted him to his apartments almost as if he were a royal personage, and Lady Blanche went to her own room. As she opened the door she saw Josine standing waiting for her.

Lady Blanche started and flushed, then she closed the door.

"Is there any news, Josine?" she asked, calmly.

Josine shook her head.

"No, miladi."

"She—she has not written?"

"No, miladi, there have been no letters. If there had been, I would have intercepted them and given them to miladi."

Lady Blanche drew a breath of relief.

"Then—then you have heard nothing?" she faltered.

"Nothing of Miss Carlisle! Nothing whatever. I know nothing except that Miss Carlisle left Ballyfloe with Milord Cliforde," she said, steadily.

Lady Blanche dismissed her with a wave of her hand, and sunk into a chair.

She knew that Lord Norman would send for her presently, and in a few minutes his valet knocked at the door and begged her to come to his master.

She rose, glanced at her face in the glass, and followed the man. The critical moment had arrived.

Lord Norman was pacing up and down the room impatiently; his traveling cloak of sable was thrown across a chair, as if he had but just flung it off, and he had made no attempt at changing his clothes.

"Blanche," he said, facing her, "why doesn't Floris come? Where is she? Why is it that no one mentions her name? Is she in the house? She must be at this hour. I asked my man if she were dressing for dinner, but I could get no satisfactory answer from him."

Lady Blanche was silent; she could not speak for the moment—could not take her eyes from his, in which, already, there began to dawn an overpowering anxiety and apprehension.

"Blanche!" he exclaimed; "what does this mean? Is she ill? For Heaven's sake, if you have any news to tell me, tell me it at once. Suspense kills me—what is it?"

She moistened her lips.

"Floris is not at Ballyfloe, Bruce."

"Not at Ballyfloe!" he repeated, with wide-opened eyes and knit brow. "Where is she, then? Great heavens! Why didn't you tell me before I left Scarfross? I could have taken train at a nearer point than this. You know I am dying to see her!"

Her heart hardened, and she met his impatient gaze steadily.

"I do not know where she is, Bruce," she said, quietly.

"Not know! What do you mean? When did she go, and why?"

"She left Ballyfloe nearly three weeks ago, Bruce—the day you started for Scarfross."

"What!" he cried, in a terrible voice; "what—where? I have had no letter! Ah, I see—you have kept it from me because I was ill. I see, I see! But for Heaven's sake, give it to me now—give them all to me—" and he held out his hand.

She shook her head.

"I have no letter for you, Bruce; she has written to no one."

His hand fell to his side.

"Written to no one, Blanche!" his face growing white. "What is this infernal mystery? Why did you lie to me the other day, and tell me she was at Scarfross? Has she not been there at all?"

"She has not been there, Bruce. She left here when you did, and we have not heard a word from her since."

He strode forward and seized her arm.

"Quick, tell me all! She is dead! I know it! I can read it in your face! Quick, tell me!"

"No, Bruce, she is not dead that I know of—indeed I do not know. But—but— Oh, Bruce! can you bear it?" she whispered.

"I can bear anything better than this suspense," he cried, hoarsely. "Don't you see it's maddening me?"

"Oh, Bruce, Bruce!" she moaned. "It is so hard for me to have to tell you! But you will hear it from me best. Bruce, be firm, be brave! Don't look at me so, or I can not go on!" for his eyes seemed penetrating to her soul

He looked aside and motioned her to go on.

"Bruce," she whispered, almost inaudibly, for her heart nearly stood still with fear—with actual fear that, when her lips formed the words he would strike, perhaps kill, her, "Bruce, Floris Carlisle is not worth a thought from you. She is a bad, wicked girl—"

"What!" and he laughed a short, wild laugh of mockery. "Go on, go on! You are mad! Floris is what?"

"Judge for yourself," she retorted, stung into courage. "Floris Carlisle has jilted you, Bruce, and run off with Bertie Clifforde!"

He looked at her with a dull, perplexed gaze.

"Is this an elaborate joke, Blanche?" he asked, quietly; then, as he scanned her face, his grasp on her arm grew tighter and he drew her to him so that she thought he was going to kill her.

"What do you say? Say it again—say it again! I didn't hear you—I could not have heard you. I must be delirious still! Floris—Floris— Well, can't you speak?" he said, harshly.

"Bruce, it is quite true. Would to Heaven it were not! She has left you, Bruce. She has gone off with Bertie Clifforde!"

He dropped her arm and stepped back, then he looked at her calmly, quietly.

"It must be a lie!" he whispered, huskily, just as Floris had whispered to Josine a fortnight ago.

She shook her head.

"It is the truth, Bruce."

"How do you know? She has not written; she has— Oh, Heaven! am I awake or dreaming? Blanche, for Heaven's sake, tell me all! I know there is some hideous mistake—of course there is some mistake—and it must be put right at once. But tell me all; don't waste a moment! Now—now!"

"Bruce, I can only tell you what I know. The day you left she received a telegram; she started for the railway station at once, and there she met Bertie Clifforde."

"A lie—a lie!" he groaned.

"Bruce, it is no idle scandal. Josine saw them off together."

"Josine, Josine! Who is Josine?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Lady Betty's maid—a great friend of Floris's."

"Fetch her—fetch Lady Betty!" he said, pointing to the door.

Lady Blanche went out; she was glad to get out, if even for a moment or two, from the sight of his face, the sound of his voice.

In five minutes she returned with the two others.

He was still sitting in the chair, looking vaguely, vacantly, out of the window.

"Oh, Bruce!" sobbed poor Lady Betty, going to him; but he kept her back with upheld hand.

"Girl," he said, sternly, "tell me what this means! Speak the truth, if you can, or, by Heaven—"

His glance was terrible and even Josine quaked; but she had gone too far to draw back.

"Milord, I know nothing but this," she said in a low, steady voice; and she repeated her lesson.

For a certainty Miss Carlisle had left Ballyfloe with Lord Cliftorde.

"And you—you believe this?" he demanded, turning to Lady Betty.

"What can I do, Bruce?" she wailed. "It is true. I have seen the porter, the guard, and—and—"

Lady Betty shook her head.

"No, Bruce, not a word. I have written to her, begging her to relieve us of this terrible suspense with one word, but she has not sent it."

"Go!" he said, pointing to the door, and the two went out, leaving Lady Blanche standing there with her hand before her eyes.

She stood thus for a moment or two, then she ventured to look at him.

He was sitting in the chair still, his face turned from her.

She went up to him and knelt beside him.

"Bruce—dear, dear Bruce—be brave! Oh, Bruce, she is not worth it; she is not, indeed!"

He turned his head, and she started and shrunk back.

His face was deathly white to the lips; his eyes filled with a despair that seemed to have transformed him into an old man.

For a moment he appeared unable to speak, then he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Blanche," he said, hoarsely, almost inaudibly, as the voice of a man at death's door, "you can do me no good! Leave me to myself!"

"But—but—" she cast a quick, fearful glance round the room! his pistol case stood on a side-table, and there was despair, frenzy on his face.

He smiled an awful smile.

"No, Blanche, do not be afraid! I shall not do that. Will you go now?"

She got up slowly. She longed, with a longing past expression, to throw her arms round him, to pour out the passionate love of her heart at his feet, to remind him that there was still one who was faithful, but she dared not—dared not!

She had gone to the length of her tether for the present; for the future—well, it lay in the hands of the gods!

Slowly she retreated from him, and left him, left him still sitting with his head bowed, and the awful look in his gray eyes.

His valet found him still sitting there when he entered an hour afterward, and was dismissed with a gesture; he found him still sitting, like a figure carved in stone, in the morning, and ventured to touch and speak to him.

At the touch Lord Norman looked up at him vaguely, then rose, rose with the stiff movement and gait of extreme age.

"We start for London by the first train," he said, in a hollow voice.

The man packed the portmanteau, and they started in the early morning, almost like thieves, for Lord Norman had bidden him keep their departure secret.

They reached London in the evening, and the whole of the night Lord Norman sat in his room, as he had sat at Ballyfloe, his eyes fixed on the ground, his gray face set into a marble calm.

In the morning he went to his solicitor's, and obtaining the address of Mr. Morrel, drove to his office.

Mr. Morrel was considerably startled at the apparition, as he almost deemed it, of the once handsome, light-hearted earl against whom he had fought so long.

"I—I am afraid you are ill, my lord!" he said, with his nervous sharpness.

Lord Norman waved all commonplace greetings aside.

"I have come to learn what you know of—of Miss Carlisle!" he said, sternly.

Mr. Morrel flashed. He felt a strong temptation to answer at once, and tell all, but he had given his promise, and he was a lawyer.

"Be seated, my lord," he said.

Lord Norman declined the chair.

"I ask you for Miss Carlisle's present address," he said, with a terrible significant calmness.

Mr. Morrel shook his head.

"I deeply regret, my lord, that I am unable to furnish you with Miss Carlisle's address," he said, gravely.

"Do you know it?"

"Yes, my lord, I know it."

"And you withhold it at her request?" he demanded, his dark eyes gleaming from his white face.

"I do, my lord. I gave Miss Carlisle my solemn promise that I would keep her whereabouts a secret. It is with the deepest regret—"

Lord Norman took up his hat and went to the door, then he paused, and facing round, looked steadily into the lawyer's nervous and embarrassed countenance.

"You can communicate with Miss Carlisle, I presume?"

"Certainly, my lord. I shall be happy to forward any message—"

"Tell her, please," he said, in a low, clear voice, "that she has nothing to fear from me; but if he should chance to cross my path I will shoot him as I would a dog! That is all!" and he slowly turned and went out.

Mr. Morrel gasped for breath for a moment.

"Phew!" he exclaimed. "Tut, tut! That is it, is it? Now, who would have thought it of such a quiet, beautiful girl? Tut, tut! but as to giving her his message—no—no, really I think it would be better to say nothing about him. Dear me! dear me! Looked half mad! Tut, tut! I can understand now why she insisted upon changing her name! Poor girl! I wonder what the rights of the story are, after all? Shoot him—who is 'him,' now—like a dog! No, no, my lord, I can't send such a message as that!"

And so good little Mr. Morrel decided to say nothing about Lord Norman's visit, and thus another opening door was closed against Floris's good angel!

CHAPTER XXV.

A STREET QUARREL.

"If I were asked which was the most beautiful month in the year," said a famous French traveler, "I should answer 'May;' and if you asked me where I would choose to spend it, I should say 'Florence.'"

It was May, a lovely, balmy, pleasantly smiling May, and Florence was looking at its best.

On one of the bridges, and leaning against the stonework and looking down at the river was a young girl.

She was dressed in mourning—not heavy crape, stiff and hideous, but simple black merino, relieved by a touch of white lace or linen at the sleeves and throat.

It was a very lovely face even in that city of lovely faces, and the people had elected to call her, not by the name she had assumed, Lillian Wood, but "the pretty English lady;" and there were many who were as pleased at winning a smile from her sweet, sad face as at drawing the copper coins from the grand people who rode lazily through the parks or crawled languidly along the quays.

Among the English at Florence it had been quite an amusement, during the long, winter months, to guess at the history of the graceful English girl who was seen so often in her solitary walks about the city; but not one of the chatter-boxes ever imagined for a moment that the girl who lived in the little house at the corner of the square, with the eccentric old Mrs. Sinclair, and who was called Lillian Wood, was none other than Floris Carlisle, once so nearly Countess of Norman.

Floris had come to Florence in the beginning of the winter, with a heart that was too heavy, as Dante says, to ache much, and had found a quiet but not unfriendly welcome from the lady who had engaged her.

Mrs. Sinclair was one of those eccentric people who permit themselves to be absorbed by an idea, and give up everything in life to the pursuit of it.

Mrs. Sinclair's great ambition was to write an exhaustive work on botany.

She was passionately fond of flowers, and had made them her study ever since she was a girl; but the book had not got itself written yet, though she was now an old woman with white hair and failing eye-sight.

It was in consequence of this failing eye-sight that she had advertised for a young girl to assist her, and she soon found that she had secured a treasure in Floris.

Floris's work was not difficult; for two hours in the morning and an hour in the evening she was occupied in making notes and copying extracts for the great work; the rest of the time was at her own disposal, and she disposed of it in learning Italian in the quietude of her own room, or wandering dreamily about the beautiful city.

To all intents and purposes, so completely was her present life divided from the old one that Floris Carlisle might indeed have been dead and Lillian Wood have sprung from her ashes.

Mrs. Sinclair had no friends beside the clergyman and the professor; no English newspaper ever entered the house; no tidings of the great world on the other side of the channel ever reached the Violet Villa, as it was called, and Floris knew nothing of Lord Norman's accident and illness, guessed nothing of the plot which Lady Blanche and Oscar Raymond had so skillfully woven and put into execution.

Slowly, dreamily, Floris crossed the bridge on this May evening, and reached the library. She stood talking to the librarian, to whom she was known, then she set off for home.

With her book under her arm she was walking quietly through a narrow street when, suddenly, there came upon the drowsy, shadowy silence the sound of men's voices raised in anger.

There was no one in the street excepting a couple of children at play in the road and a woman lolling at a door, and Floris was wondering whence the sound proceeded when, from the house opposite which she was standing, two men came out.

They came out hurriedly; the foremost one in silence, the other one vociferating in the sharp, excited, Italian fashion.

Something in the appearance of the first man attracted Floris's attention. As she stepped back to allow them to pass she saw that he was an Englishman.

It almost seemed to her for the moment as if she had seen him before, and she looked at him with a quick, frightened pulsation of her heart.

He was particularly handsome, with a pair of dark, flashing eyes, and all the manner of a young man, though his hair, cut close to the head, was gray—almost white—and his face close shaven.

It was a singularly striking face, and it affected Floris strangely; why, she did not know.

He did not see her, and would have walked past with a quick though not hurried step, but the man who followed him sprung forward and seized him by the arm.

The first man turned and faced him coolly enough, but with a glitter in his eyes that made Floris tremble.

"Well!" he said in Italian, but with an English accent.

"You shall not go! Hear me! I say you shall not go!" said the man who held him, vehemently. "You—you English are all alike; you win our money and then, *houf!* you fly! Come back!"

"Thanks, no!" said the Englishman, with a smile that was more exasperating in its cool *sang froid* than any verbal retort.

"You will not!" shouted the other, through his set teeth.

"Certainly not!" replied the Englishman. "Why should I? I have won your money; is that what you complain of? You have won enough of mine, my friend."

The Italian ground his teeth.

"You are a cheat!" he hissed.

The Englishman laughed.

"You ought to know a brother-artist when you see him, certainly," he retorted, quietly. "You are an authority on the subject whom I should not care to dispute."

"You mean—" snarled the Italian.

"Just this, my friend—that if I had not cheated, as you call it, occasionally, I should have stood little chance against you who cheat always! Good-evening."

And with a simple movement he wrenched the man's hand from its frenzied clutch and turned away.

At the moment, while Floris was thanking her stars that the affair had ended and that she was free to go on her way, the Italian raised his hand, something gleamed brightly in the murky gas-light, the Englishman uttered a sharp cry, and fell and staggered up against the post of the doorway in which she hid.

Crying for help as loudly as she could, Floris knelt down beside him and raised his head.

The street, so silent a minute ago, seemed to start into life as if by magic, and a crowd gathered round the two figures—

the prone man with his white face, and the kneeling girl with her gentle, pitying one

In another moment the police came up, and Floris hurried home to tell the terrible story to Mrs. Sinclair.

Floris was sipping her tea half an hour afterward, when the servant announced the clergyman.

He was a very old gentleman, very greatly respected and beloved by the English community in Florence, and a constant visitor at the Violet Villa.

"I am late this evening, dear madam," he said, after exchanging greetings. "But I was detained on my road hither by an accident. I was crossing the road by the hospital when the porter ran across and called me in. A man had been brought in who had been stabbed in the streets."

Floris started and put down her tea-cup.

"He was an Englishman, and that is why they sent for me, of course. I found the poor fellow in the surgeon's hands, and very much exhausted. It appears that he was stabbed while coming out of a house in one of the streets off the square. I suspect it was a quarrel arising from some gambling transaction. His account of the affair was not very clear; indeed, he seemed anxious to hush the matter up, and was very reticent."

"Is he very badly wounded?" asked Floris in a slow voice.

"No, only slightly—not dangerously; at any rate, he recovered very quickly, and, strange to say, has left the hospital. They tried to persuade him to remain, but he resolutely declined and came out with me."

"Is it possible?" breathed Floris.

"He is an Englishman!" he said, as if that explained the man's obstinacy. "An Italian, now, would have given in and laid there for a month. Poor fellow, I happen to know a great deal about him."

"Yes?" said Floris.

"Yes. He is a well-known man in Florence, and bears, I am sorry to say, too famous a character as a gambler. He came here, why, dear me, a few weeks before your arrival, my dear Miss Wood! A rich man, it was reported; at any rate, he seemed to be in possession of a large sum of money, and for a time lived in great style. He became a member of one of the fastest clubs here, and soon got himself known as a man who played continually and for large stakes. Then he disappeared for a time, and I heard that he had caught the fever. Perhaps that accounts for the change which I observed in him this evening; his hair, which was dark, has become almost gray, as is sometimes the case with young men with black hair. His name is Raymond—Oscar Raymond."

Floris turned the name over in her mind for fully a minute, but she could not recollect ever having heard it before.

She went upstairs to her room, and, setting her lattice back, looked out into the city, with its countless lights beaming like fireflies in the darkness; but it was not of Florence or the scene she had seen in the streets she was thinking; strangely, unaccountably, her thoughts had traveled backward to Lord Norman, and more clearly than she had seen him for months past his face rose before her mental vision. And yet it did not occur to her that the face of the wounded man, Oscar Raymond, was like that of her lost lover.

Perhaps if Oscar Raymond's hair had been black and he had worn a mustache the resemblance would have been too great to escape her notice; but in the six months of dissipation Oscar Raymond had altered and aged considerably, and it would have been impossible for him to repeat the comedy which had proved a tragedy for Floris Carlisle!

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN ATTRACTIVE BOTANIST.

THREE weeks passed and the routine of Floris's life went on unbroken like the daily round of a well-made clock, and she had almost "remembered to have forgotten" the incident of the gambling fray. She had so far forgotten it that she had resumed her old solitary wanderings about the city, and one afternoon was seated under the trees in the square with a book in her hand and her eyes fixed on the enpurpled hills, when she became conscious that some one was standing beside her.

She awoke from her reverie with a start, and was startled to see the Englishman she had last seen lying on the cold stones standing quietly at her elbow.

He raised his hat as she looked up, and his dark eyes met her startled gaze with a calm but earnest appeal in them.

"Do not be alarmed, I beg of you," he said, in a soft grave voice. "I fear that I have startled you?"

“No—a little, perhaps, said Floris, looking up at him slowly.

She noticed as she did so that his face was more pale and haggard than when she had first seen it, and that his left hand was thrust in the fold of his coat.

“This is the second time I have been unfortunate enough to alarm you,” he said, gently, and with a touch of genuine self-reproach and regret in his voice. “I beg you to forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” said Floris, calmly.

“Yes, there is a great deal,” he said, gravely. “I have not forgotten”—he stopped, as if uncertain how to proceed, then went on after a pause—“I fear I must have been the cause of great uneasiness and alarm to you. I wish that my friend had made his rash attempt half an hour sooner or later.”

It was said so coolly, with such an utter lack of resentment against the man who had attempted his life, that Floris gazed at him with renewed interest.

“I am glad that you are better, that you were not badly hurt. I mean,” she added, glancing at his arm, “that you were not killed.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” he said, quietly; “but it might have been worse but for you, madam.”

“For me?” with a quick glance of surprise.

“Yes,” he said, in a low voice. “You stanched the wound in time; they said at the hospital that my recovery owed everything to that.”

Floris looked down.

“I did very little; I was too frightened. But”—with another upward glance—“how did you know it was I?”

“I saw you for a moment as the blow was struck, and at the hospital they gave me this.”

And he took from inside the breast of his coat her handkerchief.

“My handkerchief!” she murmured. “I had forgotten it.”

And she held out her hand.

He was looking at the handkerchief with a strange, intent expression in his eyes, and it dwelt in them still as he turned them on her and held out the handkerchief with a reluctance which, though not marked, Floris did not fail to notice.

“I would have returned it sooner,” he said, “but the police—they are always fond of mystery—declined to give me your name. Perhaps they were right; yes, they were quite right—you had suffered enough annoyance. Not having your name, I was forced to wait and watch for you. I have seen you twice before, but not alone, and I wanted to see you alone and thank you."

Floris inclined her head. It affected her, this knowledge that she had been watched and waited for by this strange man.

He stood beside her silently for a moment, then he said:

"There was something else of yours, madam, which fell into my hands, A book—"

"Yes," said Floris, quickly.

"It was picked up close by the spot where I fell; and they gave it me under the impression that it belonged to me. I will restore it you if you will tell me where I may bring it."

"Send it to Violet Villa," said Floris, "if you please."

He bowed. Floris was about to rise and bid him good-day when he spoke again.

"You are fond of flowers—study them—madam?"

"Yes," said Floris.

"I judged so from the contents of the book. I also am fond of flowers. I have a collection, a poor one, but there are some rarities among it. Should I be asking too much if I begged you to accept of two specimens, madam?"

He spoke with such gravity and respect that Floris could not find it in her heart to refuse the offer.

"I have a friend who will be very glad to have them," she said simply. "I am her assistant, and the book was for her use, not mine. Will you send them to the Violet Villa?"

"I will," he said.

Floris went home in a strange condition of mind.

The man's manner—his words, had affected her curiosity. She found herself going over them in her mind with a wild sense of having heard them before, or rather having heard the voice before. She said nothing to Mrs Sinclair of the meeting, but set to work that evening with a strong determination to forget the whole occurrence. In the morning a messenger from one of the hotels brought a packet and a note addressed to Miss Lillian Wood.

With an unusual tremor Floris opened it.

It contained, in addition to her book, a packet inclosing half-a-dozen dried specimens of what she knew at a glance were rare flowers, and a note. It ran as follows:

"MADAM—I send the book which I found, and the flowers. It would afford me a deep satisfaction if you would allow me to offer you the remainder of my collection, which I hold as useless unless it prove of value in your eyes. Yours very truly, OSCAR RAYMOND."

Floris sat and pondered over this note for some minutes; then she went and bodily carried both flowers and note to Mrs. Sinclair.

The old lady listened indifferently enough until Floris came to the flower part of the story; then she woke to interest, and seized the specimens and uttered a cry of delight.

"My dear girl, where did you get these? Who gave them to you? Where, did you say? His collection! Whose?"

Floris explained.

"Accept them! Rob the man of such treasures! Impossible, of course! But I must see it! If the rest are anything as good as this it must be priceless! What is his address?"

Floris named the hotel.

"Write to him at once, and ask him to call," said the old lady.

Floris hesitated for a moment, then she went to her writing-table and wrote a short note, thanking him for the flowers and book, and requesting him to call on Mrs. Sinclair.

She signed the note, of course, with her assumed name, Lillian Wood, and she resolved that if he should accept the invitation she would not appear.

On the morrow he came and was shown into the library, and as the door was opened for him Floris passed out into the drawing-room.

When she heard the servant let him out of the house she returned to the library to find that Mrs. Sinclair was even more fascinated than she herself had been.

"That's a wonderful young man you have discovered, my dear!" she said, with unwonted enthusiasm.

"I discovered!" said Floris, elevating her eyebrows.

"Well, well; it was through you!" said the old lady, impatiently. "At any rate, I am much obliged to you. I don't know when I have enjoyed a visit more. He doesn't know very much about botany, but what he does know he knows thoroughly; and he has traveled. There does not seem to be any place that he does not know. Ah, that is where men have the advantage over us poor women! He is coming here to-morrow to tea, and will bring some specimens with him."

The next evening, as the lamps came in, Mr. Oscar Raymond was announced.

Mrs. Sinclair greeted him warmly, but Floris merely inclined her head.

She officiated at the tea-table, and gave him a cup of tea, then took a book and went to a remote corner.

He did not speak a word to her for some time, but confined his attentions to Mrs. Sinclair, listening rather than talking, his well-shaped head, with its close, iron-gray hair, bent with respectful interest.

Two days passed, and on the third Oscar Raymond came again.

Floris was in the library with Mrs. Sinclair, and scarcely looked up when he came and made his bow.

As before, he devoted himself to the old lady, and did not venture to address Floris until just as he was leaving.

Then he came and stood beside her, with his hat in his hand, and waited until she looked up.

"Are you going, Mr. Raymond?" she said, coldly.

"Yes," he answered, with a touch of sadness in his voice; "I am going. I waited to say 'good-by' instead of 'good-day,' Miss Wood."

Floris looked at the paper spread out on the desk before her.

"Mrs. Sinclair, having bade him adieu, had turned to her books as if there was no one beside herself in the room.

"You are going to leave Florence?" said Floris, for want of something better to say.

"Yes," he said. "You have driven me away."

"I?" exclaimed Floris, flushing but avoiding his intense gaze.

"Yes, Miss Wood, you. Oh, do not think me so blind as not to be able to see that my presence is distasteful to you!"

"Mr. Raymond!" she said, very rebukingly.

"It is true," he continued, sadly. "I know that you will be glad when I am gone. You have avoided me so plainly that—" he paused.

A vague feeling of remorse seized Floris.

"I am very, very sorry," she quietly murmured.

"No, do not say that! I know so well that you are glad this is the last time you will see me. And yet you do me a wrong, believe me!"

"How?" she asked, in a low voice, though she might have safely shouted so far as Mrs. Sinclair, absorbed in her books, was concerned.

"In this," he said, humbly. "You have heard stories about me; you have heard that I am one whose character is so bad that I am unfit to breathe the same air as yourself."

Floris lowered her lids.

"You do not deny it," he went on. "Would to Heaven that I could say they were false. But I cannot, least of all to you! But"—he sighed, and his voice grew strangely soft and sad—"but it is possible for even such as I to repent and change. And I have done both. Miss Wood, the man who stands before you is a different man to him whom you saw engaged in a vulgar brawl a month ago."

Floris remained silent. Her heart beat fast and furiously.

The soft, penitent voice, the humble, pleading words affected her more than she cared to show.

"A month may be a lifetime, and this month has been a lifetime to me! I have learned that all my past life has been wasted, and of no account—worse than wasted, seeing how great a barrier it has raised between such as I am and you."

Floris tried to rise, to speak, but she could not; the soft, musical voice held her bound and inthralled, and as she listened came the old, old question, "Where had she heard it before?"

"I cannot tell you how your coldness and avoidance of me affects me," he went on; "but I can not leave you forever without telling you that the change which has been wrought in me is your work, and has been as much your doings as—as that writing beneath your hand."

"I can not listen," murmured Floris, slowly.

"Bear with me!" he pleaded, humbly. "Though I know I risk all by thus prematurely laying my heart bare before you, I must speak! I must bare it! Miss Wood, Lillian! I love you!"

Floris rose, pale and trembling.

"You—you—"

"I love you," he said, white and trembling, even as she was. "There, I have said it, and let it stand. It has been on my mind—on my lips—no hope of winning you—and yet I must say it. But before I go, will you let me plead on my behalf?"

Floris was silent.

The witchery, the fascination which this man could exercise by voice and manner was insensibly stealing over her.

His handsome face, the dark eyes glowing with the passion of intense love, seemed to sink into her soul.

A kind of mystic glamour seemed to inwrap her as in some subtle shroud.

She could not lift her eyes to his; she could not speak.

"I love you," he repeated, and Floris, as she listened, wondered why the words did not ring and re-echo in the ears of Mrs. Sinclair as they did in her own; but the enthusiast was absorbed by her books and heard nothing.

"I love you with all my heart and soul! Send me away from you forever and I shall love you still. While I live I shall carry your image in my heart. I am a changed man. I am Oscar Raymond no longer. I can scarcely recognize myself! A month ago I was—all that you had been told I was; but now I stand before you a different being, reformed, purified by my love for you. I beg, I implore you to hesitate before you cast me off. Such as I am, my love for you has made me. For heaven's sake have pity on me."

His voice grew hoarse and broken, but still the nameless fascination held Floris bound as in a chain.

She panted for breath, like a deer hard pressed by the hounds and held at bay.

'I—I will not listen—I can not believe. Oh, go—please, go!" she panted.

He took up his hat.

"Will you meet me in the square, under the limes, tomorrow, at eleven?" he pleaded. "If it be the last time, meet me there. A soul trembling 'twixt evil and good—I beg for one last word."

"I—I will meet you," she panted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BLOW THAT STUNNED.

FLORIS lay awake that night thinking of this which had befallen her.

The passionate words, the pleading voice, rang in her ears so that she could not sleep, could not think.

She went about the house the next day like a wan ghost, so pale and quiet, and yet so lovely in her pallor and quietude, that even Mrs. Sinclair smiled through her spectacles admiringly.

"You were right to call yourself Lillian, my dear," she said. "You are like a lily broken down by rain, this morning; but I don't like to see you so pale. You must not do any work to-day."

But Floris insisted with eagerness upon accomplishing her daily task.

The day wore on, the bells filled the soft spring air with their melody, and as the sun began to slip behind the hills, she stole out to keep her appointment.

As she reached the square, glowing bravely in its budding foliage and sweet with the scent of almond blossoms, she saw him pacing to and fro, his arms folded on his breast, the sun shining on the close-cut iron-gray hair.

He turned and saw her, and came toward her with that peculiar suppressed eagerness which belongs to a lover who is still in the agonies of suspense, and raised his hat. Floris gave him her hand, and he walked beside her to the seat.

"It was good of you to come," he said at last. "I scarcely dared to hope that you would grant my request; it seemed a bold and presumptuous one while I made it, but after I left you it grew in my mind to be audacious. And yet I could not say all I wished to say last night before your friend. Ah, yes, it was good of you to come."

Floris looked straight before her; his voice seemed to sound as if from a distance and mingled with the strains of the brass band on the quay.

"I had promised," she said, in a low voice; "but I am sorry—"

"Ah, do not say that," he broke in. "If you knew how

I have looked forward to this meeting, how I have counted the hours—"

He stopped, and his white, thin hand went to his lips, as if to repress the eagerness and passion with which he had begun to speak, for Floris had shrunk slightly.

"I—forgive me—I am too impetuous," he pleaded; "but the depth of my love for you must be my excuse. Miss Wood, I have asked you to meet me here that I may have a precious opportunity of telling you how devotedly I love you, and tell you what sort and manner of man it is who dares to lift his eyes to you. Love, they say, levels all distinctions; but I feel that there is a gulf between us which only your charity and mercy can bridge over."

He paused, and Floris saw the hand resting on the seat near her elbow tremble like a leaf in the breeze.

"Last night, when I spoke to you—with the mad recklessness of a man possessed with one idea, one hope, one mad longing and desire, I expected, I dreaded that you would send me from you with a word of contempt and anger. Miss Wood, it would have been only just contempt and well-merited anger. Who am I that I should dare to speak of love to such as you? Who am I? I will tell you. I was once a gentleman, have been an adventurer and a gambler—for heaven's sake, do not turn away! Hear me out," for Floris had shrunk away from him slightly but preceptibly. "Hear me out; I beseech you," he pleaded, moistening his lips and clutching the seat. "I say that I was an adventurer and gambler, yet a change has come over my life—my very thoughts. Fate favored me; I saw you again in the quiet sanctity of your home; the reverence which you had filled me with leaped into a love so deep and passionate that I could not repress its utterance. Though I felt that you must drive me from you, as I deserve to be driven, I must speak, I must tell you all that your beauty, your purity, your goodness have wrought in me."

Floris roused herself from her reverie and raised her head, but he put up his hand slowly.

"Do not answer me yet. Give me a few more minutes, a few kind words, then—then do with me what you will. I have said that I am a gentleman by birth; but I am poor—oh, I know you so well, though I have seen you so few times that I know money, wealth or poverty would make little difference to you! I am poor. I could be a rich man yet, for I have learned some skill at the gambling table, but all that is passed. I have touched my last card, come what will. From the hour that I first saw you I resolved that my life, if I decided to keep it, should become a changed one. In the future I would place myself in the ranks with honest men, would leave the old life of adventure and trickery forever. There may be little chance for me in the future, and yet—and yet I am not without hope. I am not an old man; I am younger than you think," and he smiled, faintly, "though my hair has gone gray and the life I have led has left its marks upon my face. I am young enough to hope that, if you will trust yourself to me, I can make a place for you in the world in which you would be secure. I am young enough to feel ambition, an honorable ambition, thrill through every nerve at the prospect of a life spent in devotion to you. Will you accept that life? Will you trust me? Will you be my wife?"

He bent over her as he spoke and extended his hand tremblingly toward her, his face white and working, his eyes pleadingly fixed on hers.

Floris sat motionless, looking beyond him with eyes that saw nothing of the lovely almond blossoms or the fair scene stretched at her feet.

What should she say to him? His words, his manner of saying them, moved her as deeply as it was possible for her to be moved by voice or words.

That he loved her she could not doubt; passionate earnestness had rung in every tone.

He had not asked her to love him, he did not seem to expect it; he had asked her to trust him, to be his wife, to share and encourage his struggles toward a better life.

Should she say "Yes?" Should she trust him?

What was there left to live for? No friends, her lover false and treacherous, no object in life.

Why should she not become of some use in the social scheme, and let this man take her?

Her silence tortured him.

"Ah!" he breathed. "I see it is hopeless. My past has shocked and alarmed you. How could it be otherwise. How could I hope that you would trust yourself to one whose past, on his own confession, has been as black as mine, for your life has been like that of an inoncent child playing amid the flowers that lined its path; you have known nothing of man's baseness—and I come to you with my life all seared and stained! Of course, there can be only one answer for me! You will tell me to go, to live honestly if I can, and to forget you! But that is not possible. I can not forget. But I will remember you as one who, like an angel indeed, shone in my path for one brief moment to show me that there was still hope for even such as I!"

His voice trembled and grew almost inaudible.

Floris's eyes were filled with tears.

It was as if a soul on the brink of the precipice were holding out its hand to her, and crying, in a very piteous voice, "Save me!"

She turned her eyes upon him; he saw the tears, and a wild hope sprung up within him.

He drew a sharp breath, and his white hand stole very gently and fearfully to her arm.

She put up her hand, and set it as a barrier between them.

"Wait," she said, with a little pant. "You have not heard; I have not told you—"

"What have you to tell me?" he sked, fearfully. "Speak to me—give me an answer, for heaven's sake. See, I am patient, and—and ready to hear anything, to obey you in everything."

She struggled against the tremor that had seized her, then she raised her eyes, full of trouble and uncertainty, to his.

"I am a stranger almost to you—you know nothing about me—"

He waved his hand passionately.

"I know that I love you; all else—"

She shook her head gently.

"And is all the confidence to be on one side?" she murmured. "You have laid bare your life to me, and I can not let you think, even though we are to part now—"

"Do not speak of parting," he pleaded, with feverish eagerness.

"Even though we are to part, I can not let you think that my past has been no history, that—that—I can not go on," she broke off, piteously.

"Do not," he said quickly; "you shall tell me some other time. Oh, it is the present and the future for which I am begging. Trust yourself to me; say 'I will be your wife,' and all will be well. I know it; I feel it. I will make the remainder of your life so happy that the past, sad though it may have been, shall seem like a dream from which my love has awakened you!"

She hung her head.

"I—I do not ask you to love me—not now, at once," he went on. "In time—"

She raised her eyes and looked at him, and the look made his heart grow cold for a moment.

"No," she said, in a low voice, "you have not asked me to love you. Had you done so, I would have answered you before this, at once, I can not love you."

His face went from the faint flush which hope had implanted there to a very wan pallor.

"I can not love you," she said, bravely and firmly. "I have no power of loving left. My heart is like a stone."

She pressed her hand to her side with a piteous little gesture which wrung his heart.

"It is as if it were dead," she went on, still in the low, quivering voice. "There can be no such thing as love for me. Is it not right that I should tell you then, who have been so frank with me?" and she turned her large eyes on him piteously.

He bit his lip, and was silent.

"You ask me to trust you," she murmured. "If you knew how all faith in a man's words was slain in me you would scarcely hope that even what you have said could move me."

The tears came into her eyes, but she brushed them away quickly.

"Before I can give you any answer I must tell you my story. When you have heard it, you will know how impossible it is that there should ever be any power in my heart to give back the love you have spoken of. If—if—when you have heard all, you still think you will wish that I should be your wife—"

He seized her hand, but she disengaged it, and went on, with an unnatural calm.

"If you should still think that I could make your life better worth the living, then—"

"Then you will say 'yes?' You will be my wife?" he murmured, huskily. "Oh, take my answer now; before you say another word! I care not what may have happened in the past. I care not. Oh, do I not know beyond all doubt that, let it have been what it may, you are pure and blameless!"

His absolute trust and devotion touched her.

"Listen to me and be patient," she said. "You, who have only seen me here in Florence, only know me as a woman with a broken spirit, living a life under a dark and heavy cloud. It is hard for me even to remember that a short time ago—ah, how long it seems sometimes—I was a happy, light-hearted girl! I don't think"—pensively, and with a faint smile that was more piteous than tears—"that there was ever any girl happier than I was! I used to fear sometimes that I was too happy, and to tremble lest the gods should be envious and send a thunderbolt to shatter my joy-dream—"

"I know," he murmured, softly, sympathizingly. "Ever since last night I have told myself that it would not be possible or right for man to be so happy as your 'yes' would make me."

Floris sighed.

"I was engaged to be married to a man I loved with all my heart and soul—"

He did not move, but his lips set themselves tightly, as if he had determined to permit no sign of any suffering her story might inflict on him to escape him.

"I loved him with all my heart and soul," she repeated, almost to herself, as if she found some strange comfort in the words. "He was my superior in rank and wealth, in position, but the world had forgotten that, and everybody thought that we were going to be very happy. I did not doubt his love, no, to the last, the last moment, I clung to my faith in him. Even now I wake sometimes at night and wonder whether I have not been deceived, whether it could be possible that he should have been so base and false."

She paused a moment. Like a statue Oscar Raymond leaned on the back of the seat, his hands clasped, his eyes fixed on her face.

"We were almost on the eve of our marriage," Floris went on, in a low voice, which, try as she would to keep it calm and steady, quivered like the tremulo of a harp. "We were staying at a great country house. Happy, so happy, that I began to look upon myself as one beyond the reach of sorrow. One day"—she stopped, and her face grew white.

"Why tell me? Why torture yourself, dearest?" he whispered, imploringly.

"One day," she went on, as if determined to go through with the task she had set herself, "a servant came to me with a wild story which I at first put down to the ravings of a lunatic. She told me that the man I loved was false to me—"

He did not move, but his eyes grew fixed; with an intent expression in them, as if he were looking through and beyond her.

"She told me that another woman in the same house had stolen his heart from me, and that that very night they had planned to fly together; that he had in cold blood decided to leave me for her, to desert me who loved him with all my heart and soul, who would have given my life to insure one hour's happiness to him, who, if—if he had come to me and told me that he loved her best would have given him his freedom and—" she broke off, and a passionate sob seemed to choke her.

The man beside her did not move, did not speak.

"I—I treated the girl's story as a lie, a stupid invention prompted by malice. I—I—oh, heaven! it all comes back to me now! I would not believe until I had proof, until I saw, heard, was shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that my lover had been false to me. The girl offered proof. That afternoon I followed her to a conservatory near a room. I—I—saw the man I loved at the feet of the woman who had stolen him from me; I—I can not go on. I—oh, leave me! leave me!"

And hiding her face in her hands she wept, wept bitterly for the first time since her mother's death.

And he?

He stood beside her like a man turned to stone.

Gradually the truth had broken in upon his soul.

Gradually, step by step, he had traced the identity of this woman he loved with all the passion his intense nature was capable of, with the girl whose happiness he had, with diabolical ingenuity, wrecked and ruined.

The blow stunned him. It was as if some one had plucked his heart out by the roots.

Despair—despair darker and more terrible than that which falls upon the assassin—fell upon him, like the cold hand of death.

The girl with the pure, sweet eyes, with the pale, lovely, suffering face, was the girl whose happiness he had hunted down and destroyed!

She was not Lillian Wood, but Floris Carlisle!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FIGHTING LIFE'S BATTLE

FLORIS CARLISLE! He clutched the seat with both hands, and looked down at her as she bent forward, her face hidden in her hands, her slight figure shaken by her grief; looked down at her with an expression in his face which, dreadful as it was, but poorly reflected the remorse within him.

Retribution! What retribution could be more dire—more complete than this?

That the very woman who had, as it were, plucked him from the depths of degradation and inspired him with a desire for a higher life should prove to be the girl whom he had, with cold-blooded heartlessness, tricked and deceived!

It seemed so direct a blow from an indignant Providence that he stood stunned and overwhelmed.

What should he say to her? Great and merciful Heaven! what could he say? In an instant a wild temptation assailed him. Why should he tell her who he was, and the crime he had committed?

Why not keep his secret forever, or at any rate until he had married her and made her his own? He might tell her then, perhaps.

He put the terrible temptation away from him with a shudder. Vile as he had been, he was not vile enough for that.

His head drooped; a wistful, aching longing came over him to tell her all; to throw himself at her feet and say, "It is I, who love you better than life itself, who have done this!" but he could not find strength for it.

He waited; silent, motionless—his brain whirling, his heart aching with a dull, gnawing despair.

Floris struggled with her outburst of grief.

Slowly she raised her head, and stretched out her hand toward him, but he did not—could not—take it.

"Forgive me!" she said: "I—I—have been very selfish. But it will all come back to me so plainly! It seems only yesterday that it all happened, instead of months ago! And now—now that I have told you all, you see, do you not, that it is impossible I could ever be your wife: do you not?"

He tried to speak, but the words died away on his dry lips.

"Ah, yes," she said, "it is better that it should be so, that you should understand why—why it cannot be as you would wish it. But I am very grateful; you have been very kind and considerate, and I am sorry that I could not say yes. As to trust, yes, I would have trusted you. I do not think you will go back to the evil life you have lived. If—if," she went on, looking up at him and starting slightly at the sight of the palor and haggardness which had settled on his face, "if you have freely forgiven me for inflicting so much pain on you, will you promise me that—that you will keep the resolution that you have made?"

He was silent.

She sighed.

"If you would," she pleaded meekly, "it would be some consolation for me in my solitude to feel that I had been the means of effecting some good in my poor, miserable life! Will you not promise to keep upon the path which you have struck out for yourself?"

She put out her hand with a humble, deprecating glance at him, and slowly he took her hand and held it in his own, hot and burning and feverish.

"I promise," he said, hoarsely. "I promise! You shall see that I can remember, and keep my promise."

That was all. He could not trust himself to utter another word.

He put her hand down gently, looked into her eyes with all the agony of despair burning in his, and turned and left her.

With unsteady steps, and with the face of a man who has suddenly been told that he is condemned to death, he made his way to his hotel.

It was the Hotel Italia, the best hotel in the place, and he held the best rooms in it.

For when he had told Floris that he was poor he had omitted to tell her that it was his intention to give up the money he had to some charity.

He crossed the street, and, entering the hall, went up to the landlord, whose voice he heard raised in loud conversation with his wife.

Oscar Raymond leaned against the window of the little office and waited till the man was disengaged.

Now and then fragments of the conversation reached him. It seemed that they were deploring their lack of accommodation.

An English milord was about to arrive with his friends and suite, and the Hotel Italia was too full to afford them the rooms they required.

"*Barta!* It is always so!" ejaculated the little landlord, excitedly. "When one is busy then come persons of importance, and one has to send them to the attics—at other times, when one is empty, then no one comes of any kind; it is always so!"

Oscar Raymond stepped up to him.

"You can have my rooms," he said. "I leave Florence to-night."

"But, signor—"

"You can have them in half an hour," went on Oscar Raymond. "Send my luggage to the railway station."

The landlord was profuse in his regrets at losing so good a customer as Signor Raymond, and gratitude for his consideration.

"You see, this is a great English milord—oh, very great! and naturally the Hotel Italia would like to give him of its best."

"Who is he?" asked Oscar Raymond, indifferently.

The landlord tried to remember the name, but after striking his forehead melodramatically several times, gave it up as a bad job, and Oscar Raymond ascended to his rooms and listlessly packed his things. When he had finished, he descended and gave the keys of his apartments to the landlord.

"They are at your disposal now," he said.

Having paid his bills, he went to the station, and aimlessly took a ticket for Paris. In Paris he would be able to think of his ultimate destination. Here, in Florence, he could think of nothing save the pale, lovely face of the girl he had left weeping in the square; the girl whose happiness he would give his heart's blood to secure; the girl whose felicity he had ruined and wrecked.

More utterly wretched than he had thought it possible for him ever to be, he paced up and down the station.

The usual bustle and stir of an arriving train passed him by unnoticed, the people stared now and then at the tall, distinguished man with the wan, haggard face, but he was unconscious of their glances. All his thoughts were concentrated on Floris Carlisle.

The expected train came in, and he was turning in his restless promenade to get out of the way of the bustle, when he saw the door of a first-class compartment open and a gentleman alight. It was Lord Norman.

In a moment, at sight of him, Oscar Raymond stood motionless, then with an effort he recovered his presence of mind and slipped behind a pillar.

Lord Norman held out his hand to some one in the carriage, and the some one proved to be Lady Blanche.

Lord Seymour followed, and the two valets and Lady Blanche's maid came up to them from a second-class carriage.

Oscar Raymond took in all the scene meant in a moment.

They were married!

He leaned against the pillar, his arms folded across his chest, his head drooping.

They were married! The plot he had conceived had been successful!

Lady Blanche had triumphed, and Floris Carlisle was left in the blankness of solitude and desertion.

An awful rage and despair sprung full-born into his breast.

Lady Blanche looked more beautiful than ever as she stood by Lord Norman's side. The old serene, placid loveliness had returned to her fair face, and shone in her velvety eyes.

"I have triumphed! I have won!" seemed to proclaim itself in her very gait and bearing.

And as he looked there rose before his eyes the vision of Floris, pale and sad and despairing, robbed by the vilest acts of her lover, and her young life condemned to melancholy and hopeless solitude.

A mad rage devoured him. With clinched hands he strode forward as if to accost her, then he remembered what he was and shrunk back. But he would not leave Florence now.

He waited until the party had started for the hotel, in the grandest carriage available, then moodily followed them.

When he reached the hotel, the confusion attendant upon the arrival of such important guests reigned rampant.

In the stir and bustle and confusion of waiters and chambermaids—flying apparently with no definite purpose, hither and thither—his return was unnoticed.

He waited in the shadows of the hall for a little while, with no settled intention in his mind, only a dim, vague rage of impatience, then a thought struck him.

He went to the office and opened the visitors' book. Never, for a moment, did he doubt that they were married, but he thought he would ascertain.

With trembling hand he turned to the page for the day and bent over it in the dim light.

Then, with a low cry of relief, he shut the book and wiped from his brow the sweat that had gathered there.

The name she had written was not Blanche Norman, but Blanche Seymour!

They were not married yet!

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SPORT OF THE GODS.

The moon rose over the city and poured its light on to the front of the Hotel Italia.

In a balcony on the first floor Lord Norman was seated in a low chair.

A cigar that had gone out was between his fingers, and his thoughts seemed to have wandered far away.

He was looking older by some years than when we saw him last, and there was a scar on his forehead which Lord Harry's stag had left as a slight reminder.

There was, too, a sad moodiness in the dark eyes that robbbed his face of its youthfulness, and was not good to see.

It was the look of a man who had found life considerably less worth living for—a look of doubt and distrust of his fellows, which Rousseau might have worn in his worst epoch.

He sat very still, and with the grave, queer look in his eyes, and doubtless his mind was wandering to some of those moonlight nights on which, with Floris by his side, he had felt assured that the world was the best of all possible worlds, and that life was well worth living.

Absorbed in this moody contemplation, he did not hear a light step on the window-sill behind him; and Lady Blanche stepped out and laid her hand on his shoulder before he knew that she was near.

"How beautiful it is, Bruce!" she said, softly, looking out on the city that lay in the moonlight beneath them like a picture of Canaletto's. "I am awfully fond of Florence. And one sees it at its best to-night."

He nodded, but did not speak.

Never very talkative, he had become remarkably silent and short of speech since the news of Floris's "falseness" had been broken to him.

"Poor papa has gone to bed," she went on, softly, her hand resting on his shoulder, so that her white, delicate fingers could touch his hair. "He is tired out. What do you think he said to-night, Bruce?" and she blushed and smiled.

"Don't know," came listlessly from his lips.

"He said that we might have waited until we were married before we made this trip, and that it was confoundedly like a honey-moon. Poor papa! It was a little too bad to drag him across the channel; but it will do him good, and I am sure you are ever so much better, aren't you, Bruce?"

"Considering that there hasn't been the slightest thing the matter with me for months past, I may say that I am," he answered, languidly. "I've noiced, Blanche, that you've got a fixed idea in your head that this trip was made for my especial benefit. It is very flattering to me, but my—"

"Yes, yes; I know," she said, with a little laugh, but with a sudden restless shimmer in her eyes that was strangely at variance with her serene and reposeful voice. "But all the time it was I who was so anxious to get out of England. "It is quite time, Bruce; I had grown sick of England; Scotland, especially."

"Scotland isn't England," he murmured.

"I longed to get away, and I should have been ill if I hadn't crossed the channel. And—and it was so good of you to consent to our marriage taking place at Paris—"

He looked at his cigar, and seeing that it was out, flung it away and felt for his cigar-case.

"I have a letter to write now, Bruce," she said, presently. "It is but a short one. Wait here and I will join you when I have finished.

And she left him.

Five minutes passed, and then he rose and began to pace up and down. The balcony ran the length of the house, and, making a turn, reached the head of the staircase leading to the street.

The city looked so beautiful that he felt tempted to stroll. He got his hat from the room, and passing along the balcony went down the steps into the street.

Ten minutes after he had gone a tall figure, a duplicate of his, stepped out from one of the rooms on the same floor, and, walking to the spot where he had sat, went to the rail and leaned over.

As he did so Lady Blanche came through the window with the letter she had written in her hand.

"Bruce, I have written my letter. Shall we go and post it? A walk would be beautiful now, it is so cool and pleasant. Bruce, are you asleep?" and she went up softly behind him and touched his arm.

The man turned slowly and raised his hat, the moonlight falling fully upon his wan and haggard face.

Lady Blanche staggered and clutched the rail with one hand while the other flew to her heart.

"Oscar Raymond!" she breathed, with ashy lips. "Oscar Raymond!"

Lord Norman stood for a moment at the bottom of the steps, then aimlessly turned to the right and sauntered along the quiet street.

The beauty of the city, hushed in the serene rays of the moon, touched him with a pensive sadness, and recalled the past with a peculiar poignancy.

He was to be married to Lady Blanche in two or three weeks, by which time they expected to reach Paris in their wanderings; but if any one had stopped him and asked him why he was marrying her he would have been puzzled to find a good and sufficient reason.

After the recovery from the shock of Floris's supposed baseness, he had declared that he would never again look upon a woman with the eyes of kindness, would live and die hating and avoiding her sex.

For weeks he had kept himself secluded from the world, had shut himself up and yielded to the bitterness and grief which the destruction of his faith in the beautiful girl-love had caused him.

But men of Lord Norman's class can not remain in seclusion long. They have duties to perform which may not be neglected, and gradually he emerged from his retirement and was seen in his old world again—the world of the clubs and "the shady side of Pall Mall."

Lady Blanche played a waiting game, and her reward came in due season.

One evening, in the midst of a song she was singing while he was lounging in the glass-house within hearing, the song came to an abrupt stop.

He turned to see the cause, and saw that her head had dropped on her hands, as if she had broken down.

He flung his cigar away and went quickly to her.

"What is the matter, Blanche?" he asked.

She looked up and tried to smile, as if ashamed and annoyed.

"Nothing, nothing at all, Bruce," she said, wiping her eyes. "I felt rather low-spirited, that was all. Everything seems to go wrong, and at cross-purposes, doesn't it? Go back to your cigar, Bruce, and I'll play something excruciatingly lively."

"Do not," he said.

Then he stood still and looked down at her.

He knew that she loved him; she was beautiful—a woman of whom any man might well be proud.

It was necesary that he should marry, unless he wished the old title he bore to die out.

Why not she as well as any other? In time, he told himself, with a swift pang, he should forget Floris, should learn to love Blanche.

He made up his mind in a moment as he stood there.

"Blanche," he said, laying his hand gently on her shoulder "will you be my wife?"

For a moment the color left her face, and her heart seemed to stand still. It had come at last.

"Be my wife, Blanche," he said, gently, "and I will try to make you happy."

She turned her face upon him and looked at him with all her soul in her eyes.

"Ah, Bruce, you would have to try such a very little! Ah, you know—you know!"

Then he bent and kissed her, and she put her arms round his neck and drew him down to her in a passionate embrace.

And so she had won him at last. She was too clever to rest assured on a false security.

While Bruce was in England he might meet Floris Carlisle at any hour, explanations might ensue, and—

She persuaded him to take her, Lord Seymour accompanying them, on a Continental trip.

"We can be married at Paris, Bruce. I hate London. Let us be married at Paris."

He had consented, as he would have done if she had asked him to take her to Timbuctoo; and so here they were in Florence, and in a few weeks they were to be married.

Lord Norman sauntered on, thinking of it all, wandering mentally back to the old days when Floris was at his side, and he had so often tried to persuade her to name the day for their union. She had always put him off.

"She loved Bertie all the time, poor girl," he thought bitterly, as he stopped and looked at the river, leaning on the bridge, all unconsciously, where Floris so often stood. "Poor girl, why did she deceive me? Why did she not come to me and say, 'Bruce, I do not love you; I find that my heart is not given to you; I love Bertie?' Heaven knows, I would have let her go without a single hard thought."

He lighted another cigar, and turned from the bridge.

Presently, he heard the sound of a piano. It would not have attracted his attention—for it was not the first piano he had heard that night—but there was something in the air that seemed familiar.

What was it? A voice now rose—a very soft, pretty voice, and accompanying the piano. He could not catch the words, and yet, almost unconsciously, he found himself supplying them. What were they? Surely, he had heard them sung to this tune:

"My sweet girl love, with frank, gray eyes,
  Though years have passed I see you still,
  There where you stood beside the mill,
Beneath the bright autumnal skies
  Low o'er the marsh the curlew flew,
The mavis sung upon the bough.
  Oh, love, dear love, my heart was true,
It beats as truly, fondly now.
  Though years have passed, I love you yet;
  Do you still remember, or do you forget?"

Where had he heard them? They were the verses Floris had sung to Bertie one morning—the morning of the fancy fair. A pang shot through his heart; in his mind's eye he saw her as she looked that day—so fair and bright and girlish!

He looked up at the house. It was a villa almost shrouded by trees; there was a light burning in the window on the ground floor, and through the open window came the sound of the piano and the voice.

A few minutes passed, and he was about to go on his way when he heard a light step behind him. Some one had come from the house into the garden, tempted into the night air by the moonlight. He wondered vaguely whether it was the unknown singer.

The steps came nearer, and the tall, slim figure of a girl came slowly down to the gate and stood behind it, so near that he could have touched her with his hand, but he could not see her face.

So there she stood within reach of him, all unconscious of his proximity.

She stood for a moment and then turned, but at that instant a longing to see her face, which had fallen upon Lord Norman, became irresistible.

He rose to his full height and turned to the gate.

He knew her at once, and his heart seemed to stand still.

If it had been to save his life, he could not have resisted speaking her name.

"Floris!" he said, softly, yet in a tone of intense feeling.

She heard him, and uttering a faint cry, put her hand to her heart, but she did not turn her head.

Perhaps—who knows—she thought that it was a trick of her imagination.

How often in her dreams she had heard him call her thus! In her dreams!

"Floris!" he said again.

Then she turned her white face and looked at him.

For a moment they looked into each other's eyes as if they were both looking at the ghosts of their dead selves.

Then she saw it was indeed he, and with a low cry of pain—actual pain—she covered her face with her hands.

He set his teeth. He misunderstood the gesture, and took it for one of guilt and remorse.

"Floris," he said, in a low voice, "it is indeed you? Are you afraid of me?"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CURTAIN UPLIFTED.

Her hands dropped from her face, and she shook her head, her great eyes fixed on him with a wistful yearning.

"Will you not speak to me?" he said, holding the gate with his hot hands, his heart beating fast. "You are not afraid of me? You have no need to be! Speak to me, Floris!"

She opened her lips—the lips he had kissed.

"No; I am not afraid," she murmured, and her voice sounded to him like a ghost's. "How—why did you come here?" and she looked around.

"I am staying here, in Florence," he said, with a voice that shook from agitation. "I did not know—"

"You did not know that I was here," she finished for him, "or you would not have come."

"No; I should not have come. No! And yet I am not sorry that I have seen you!"

A pause for a moment. She could not summon strength enough to leave him. His eyes—so wistful, so sad, so reproachful—held her as by a charm.

"Have you—been ill?" he asked, suddenly, almost gently.

She shook her head.

"Why do you wear that black dress?" he asked.

"My mother—" she faltered.

He hung his head.

"I did not know. Why did you not tell—but why should you? And you are not ill?"

"No."

"And—and—you are happy?" he continued, hoarsely.

"The look of reproach, of angelic sadness that shone from her dark eyes went to his soul.

He sighed—it was almost a groan.

"Has he tired of you already?" he said, hoarsely. "Great Heaven! Is it possible? Floris, I could almost wish that I had not seen you—and yet—"

Two tears gathered in her eyes and fell slowly on her cheek. The sight of them tortured him.

"For heaven's sake, don't cry!" he said, hastily; "the—the past is over and done with. I—I am sorry you are not happy. Oh, Heaven! to see you standing there and to know the gulf that divides us! Floris—Floris, why did you do it?"

She looked at him with troubled, wondering questioning.

"Why did you, Floris? Heaven—why did you not tell me—why did you not come to me and—and—but to go like that without a word! Did you want to break my heart—were you quite heartless, Floris?"

She looked at him as if she could not believe her senses, and one white hand went to her forehead tremblingly.

"I do not understand! Why do you speak to me like this—why do you ask me these questions? Oh, it is cruel, cruel, knowing how wicked you have been—how hard and heartless yourself!"

"I!" he said, in amazement; and in his eagerness and excitement he pushed the gate open; but, as she shrank back, he too stepped back and closed it again. "I!"

"Oh, do not mock me!" she almost wailed. "I do not want you to say that you are sorry; I did not wish to see you; I was learning to forget—"

Her voice faltered and broke.

"Forget!" he echoed, almost fiercely. "You can talk of forgetting to me! Do you think that any human being, however callous, can forget another she has wronged as you have wronged me?"

"Wronged you!" she cried, in a low voice; "wronged you? I? Oh, Bruce, Bruce!"

"Yes, cruelly, foully wronged me!" he said passionately. "Did ever man love a woman more dearly than I loved you? And you stole away from me, jilted me without a word of warning—one word of remorse or penitence! If I did not love you, I could strike you down at my feet now."

She shrunk back from his blazing eyes and wild, wicked words.

"I did you no wrong," she said, sadly, her lips quivering.

He controlled himself as if by a mighty effort, and drew a long breath.

"We will not bandy words," he said, grimly; "I will not detain you many moments longer. I want to say this, and then I will go. When I heard of your treachery—and his—I swore that whenever I met him, let it be when and where it might, I would kill him. But I have repented of that rash oath; I should have remembered that your love made him sacred to me. Tell him that he need hide no longer—that he need not fear me. For your sake he shall go unpunished for as black a piece of treachery as the world has seen since Judas!"

Floris put out her hand to him.

"What are you saying? What are these wild words? Whom am I to tell? Oh, am I dreaming?"

"Whom? The man who stole you from me—Bertie Clifforde," he said, white to the lips and unnaturally calm..

Floris put her hands to her brow.

"Bertie Clifforde—the man— Oh, Heaven! what does this mean?"

He looked at her, a wild, mad doubt rising in his mind.

"Yes, Bertie Clifforde! Are you not married to him?"

"No," came from her parched lips.

He clutched the gate.

"No! Then, do you tell me—but no, he would not be so base and vile as that. Then where is he? You fled with him; you left Ballyfloe together! Will you deny that?"

Floris came nearer. Truth alone in her face, the dignity of injured innocence beamed from her dark eyes.

"I deny! No! It is true, I came with Lord Clifforde from Ballyfloe—"

He made a despairing gesture.

"Why should we bandy words? Good-by, Floris; good-by! Tell him he is safe from me; tell him that—" he turned, as her voice rung out, clear and commanding:

"Stop!"

He stood stock still and waited.

"Lord Norman, you have cruelly slandered me—ay, more, an absent man! One so honorable and good that his name should not pass your stained and dishonored lips! You accuse me of flying—flying—with Lord Clifforde!"

She laughed—a terrible, piteous laugh.

"What mad story you have heard I know not. The truth is all I know or care for. Lord Clifforde met me by accident at Ballyfloe station; he accompanied me to London, and then, having done all that a brother could do to comfort and console me under my heavy trouble, he left me. Since that hour I have neither seen nor heard from him. There is my answer to the foul lie you heard and believed!"

He glared at her—white, breathless.

"You—you received a telegram from him?"

"A telegram?" she repeated. "Ah! From him? No, from home. It was to say that my mother was dying—"

"Great and merciful Heaven! Floris—Floris!" he cried, in a voice of despair, "is this true? Oh, how blind, blind I have been; how mad! Floris, forgive me! Forgive—oh, my poor darling! Why are you here? Why did you not write to me? Why—my brain is reeling! Have pity on me, Floris, and tell me all; this hideous mystery holds me in a net!"

She saw the sweat standing in great drops upon his brow, and his hands clinch on the gate until they were white as his face.

"I am here—earning my living," she said, simply. "I came here to be away from England, to learn to forget, to—to—I must go now—Lord Norman. Good-by."

"No!" he cried, hoarsely; "not yet. Go? By Heaven, you shall not go! Floris! Floris! My darling, my long-lost darling!" and he stretched out his hands.

A light, a beautiful light, shone in her eyes, and she made a step forward. Then suddenly she stopped and shuddered.

"No—no!" she wailed. "You forget—you have forgotten Lady Blanche!"

He started and a cold chill fell upon his passion.

"Blanche!" he echoed, huskily.

Great Heaven! He was to be married to her in a few days, married to her; and Floris—

She put out her hand to him.

"Oh, Bruce, Bruce, how could you have been so wicked?"

He hung his head.

"Be just!" he murmured. "You left me. I was alone in the world. I had lost you—why did it matter whom I married—"

She moaned and hid her face, then she looked up suddenly.

"I left you!" she said, in a low, intense tone. "You had lost me! Oh, Bruce, Bruce, you were false to me before I left Ballyfloe. You think I do not know—"

He started.

"I false to you before—I false to you! Floris, what is this? For heaven's sake, speak plainly! Speak out at once! I am almost frenzied with this torture! I false to you! Am I dreaming?"

She looked at him, her eyes full of a sad reproach and despair.

"Why do you force me to speak?" she said, in a low voice. "What can it matter now? All is past between us. You are married—"

"No!" he thundered.

She panted, then her quick eyes read the truth.

"Ah, not yet, but going to be. Is it not so, Bruce?"

He hung his head then he looked up.

"Never mind Blanche," he said, hoarsely, "tell me what you meant by my being false to you. What lies have they told you? Great Heaven, what is this mystery which has wrecked and ruined both our lives? What have they told you?"

She came nearer.

"Bruce," mournfully, "what they told me would have mattered little, but—I saw for myself!"

"Saw for yourself! Saw what?" he demanded.

She turned her head away.

"Bruce, I—I was in the greenhouse on the afternoon you came back from Scarfross to meet Lady Blanche, and saw and heard all that passed between you! Oh, Bruce, Heaven forgive you as—I—have done!" and the tears welled to her eyes.

There was silence for a moment, silence broken by an awful oath.

She started and turned to him. He had flung the gate open and stood before her, his eyes blazing into hers, his lips set.

"Are you mad?" he cried, almost inaudibly. "Floris, look at me! Look at me! Look at me, I say!"

She raised her eyes to his fearlessly, though there was something awful in the expression of his face.

"Now tell me, slowly, carefully, what you mean; what you think you saw?"

She opened her lips once, twice; the scene came back in all its force and shook her very soul.

"Bruce, I saw you at her feet. I heard you implore her to fly with you. I heard you tell her that you had never loved—loved—any other than her! I heard you say that I—oh, I can not go on! Spare me!"

"You saw—you heard!" he said, his face close to hers. "Great Heaven! am I going mad? When was this?"

"The day you left Ballyfloe for Scarfross. Ah, have you no pity on me, no mercy?"

"The day I left Ballyfloe!" he repated, disregarding her entreaty. "You say I came back to Ballyfloe—that I saw Blanche? It is a lie! Do you hear? It is a lie! Whoever told you—but you saw me, you say? Floris, let me look at you. Is this my Floris who stands here and tells me this? Am I mad—are we both mad? Merciful Heaven, what does it mean? Listen to me!" and he drew her closer to him by her arm, so close that his hot breath fanned her cheek. "Listen to me, as if the words I am going to speak were those of a dying man! Floris, you could not have seen me on that day—you did not see me, as you describe it, on any day, at that time; but on that day—I tell you solemnly here face to face, with Heaven above us to hear me, that I did not come back to Ballyfloe that day!"

She panted, and drew back her head to gaze at him.

"Bruce!"

"I did not come back," he repeated, in a frenzied voice. "I went straight to Scarfross! Great Heaven—do you doubt me? A dozen witnesses can prove it. There were men whose side I never left; Lord Harry—Donald. Go back—why, I did not go back for weeks; I was nearly killed the following morning—"

"Ah," she breathed, her breath coming in quick gasps.

—"Was struck down by a stag, and kept at Scarfross for weeks confined to my bed—to my room. All this can be proved! Are you listening? Why do you stare at me so?"

"Then—then, that is why you did not write?" she gasped, an awful sense of mystery inwrapping her.

"Yes! At first I was senseless for days; unable to write for weeks. When I was able, they told me that you had—had fled with Bertie! Now do you understand that you can not have seen me with Blanche, as you suppose?"

She uttered a cry of despair.

"Bruce, I saw you—"

"Great Heaven! I shall go mad!"

"And if it was not you—who was it?"

He looked at her scared, frightened face.

"Who was it?" I saw you—heard you speak to her. The girl Josine—"

"Josine!" he muttered.

"Josine told me that I should do so: led me to the place; stood beside me. If you speak of proof—ask her. Oh, Bruce! and yet—and yet—"

He laughed grimly, savagely.

"And yet you think I do not speak the truth. My poor Floris! My brain is reeling! There is some devilish mystery at the bottom of this! What it is, Heaven only knows; but I will learn. The girl Josine, you say—where is she? and Blanche—"

"Who told you that I fled with Lord Clifforde?" asked Floris, quickly.

"Blanche!" he returned, quickly.

A cold shudder ran through her, and her head drooped.

"Do you mean to say that—" he could not go on for a moment—"that Blanche lied, and purposely deceived me—deceived both of us?" he said, hoarsely.

She shook her head wearily.

"I do not know! I can not say! It is all dark, dark to me!"

"But there shall be light!" he exclaimed. "Blanche is here in Florence. She shall tell me the truth; the girl Josine, I will wring the truth from her! Oh, my darling! Oh, Floris, my Floris, thank Heaven it is not too late!" and he put out his arms.

She drew back from him, deathly pale, and her lips parted slowly, sadly.

"Too late; it is too late!" she murmured, gently. "We can not bring back the past. It is too late! Think of Blanche, Bruce! She has done no wrong. You—you are to be married to her—"

His hands fell to his side, he turned his face away.

"Why should she suffer? For us, Bruce, all is lost save honor. You must still keep that! There has been some dark mystery; I do not know what it is, no, not even yet; but we have met again too late. Good-by, Bruce—good-by. In time, far away in the future, we may meet—" her voice broke, and with a groan he took a step toward her, but she drew still further back—"in time you and I will will meet as friends—dear, true friends—but no more, Bruce. Good-by!"

She put out her hand as she spoke, and he seized it and held it.

"Good-by?" he cried, hoarsely. "Do you think I am going to let you go like this? No! Floris, you are mine—you love me still—"

"Ah, yes," she breathed, the tears running down her sweet face; "I love you still; but it is because of that we must part. Stand firm by your honor, Bruce; do not play Lady Blanche false as—as—I once thought that you had played me. Good-by!"

He caught her hand to his lips and kissed it passionately, his hot lips burning it, and with a cry of mingled pain and joy that he should so kiss her, she drew her hand away and vanished.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TO RIGHT THE WRONG.

Lady Blanche, recoiling against the balcony, gazed up at the wan, haggard face with the black, sombre eyes glowing like lamps amid its whiteness.

"What are you doing here?" she gasped. "What do you want with me?"

He looked down at her with a fixed, intent expression on his face, as if he were looking through her, like a man playing some difficult part and trying to remember it. The look haunted her for years afterward.

"Why are you here?" she demanded. "You promised to—"

"Keep away from England," he said, and his voice sounded dull and hollow. "Is this England? I have not sought you—you have followed me. It is the hand of fate! If I had not seen you to-night I should have been a hundred miles away. It is fate! We played with it for some time, trod it under foot, and laughed at it. It is fate's turn now to laugh at us, to tread us under its avenging feet. Lady Blanche, the whirligig of time brings its own revenges; it has brought vengeance upon us—"

"What do you mean?" she said, trying to look him down, to awe him with the cold *hauteur* which was her second nature; but the dark eyes did not flinch, the hard, hollow voice did not falter. Like some prophet of old he stood before her, unyielding, implacable. "Why did you follow me here to the hotel? Do you want money? If so, you shall have it. I will send it to you. Every moment you remain here is one of peril. Lord Norman is with me. He will return immediately, and if he finds you—"

He did not seem to be listening.

"Money!" he said, as if that word alone had caught his ear. "I have sold my soul for money. Judas brought back his blood-stained gold—I bring back yours, Lady Blanche!"

He thrust his hand into his breast quickly as he spoke, and drew out a leathern case.

"It is here—all of it! Take it! It has been a curse to me! Look at me, Lady Blanche, and see that I will speak the truth!"

She looked at his haggard face, with its deep lines telling of dissipation and remorse; at the white hair, which, when she had last seen him, was black as Lord Norman's; at the cavernous eyes gleaming with a feverish intensity of purpose.

"Since I left you in England, carrying the price of my treachery with me, I have been living the life of a gambler. I have been like one drifting toward the whirlpool of destruction—conscienceless, without remorse. But a hand was stretched out to save me. To-day, Lady Blanche, for the first time, I have seen the cruelty and vileness of our work in its true colors. It is as if a veil had been torn from before my eyes, and the true meaning of what we conspired to do, and did, was revealed to me. Lady Blanche, you asked me, when last we met, if I had no remorse. I laughed the question away. It is my turn to ask you if you feel none?"

She made a gesture in the negative.

"It has fallen upon me; it will fall upon you. Thank Heaven, while you have time, that it is not too late to repair your evil work!"

"What do you mean?" she asked in a voice of suppressed anger and doubt.

"Thank Heaven that you are not married to Bruce Norman! The task would have been a thousand times harder for you if you had been; it is plenty hard enough now."

"What is hard? Why do you talk and look so strangely?" she demanded, trying to speak haughtily, but trembling.

"This night, Lady Blanche, Lord Norman must be told all that you and I have done!"

"What?" she gasped.

"This night he must be shown how cruel an injustice has been wrought an innocent girl; he must be told that it was you who were false and not Floris Carlisle!"

She looked at him for a moment with a very wild, incredulous stare, then laughed a suppressed laugh of scorn and defiance.

"I see! You want more money."

He dropped the leathern case at her feet with a dull, grim apathy.

She started.

"If it is not money, what is it you want?" she said. "You will not deceive me with this rant. You forget that I am acquainted with your love of the melodramatic. This is, I suppose, a piece of play-acting for my especial behoof and amusement or"—she turned pale, and her eyes flashed—"you have met with Floris Carlisle and betrayed me! Is that it? She has bought you over—perhaps promised you half of Lord Norman's wealth! Is that it? You have met her?"

He eyed her listlessly, wearily, with the same set look of resolution.

"Yes, I have met her," he said; and for the first time a faint touch of color came into his face "I have seen her, and I love her!"

"You love her!" she echoed.

"I love her. Do you misunderstand me, Lady Blanche. I love her without hope; I am content to love her, so that I can make her reparation. It is all I have to live for, and I will do it."

There was silence for a moment.

"What do you wish to do?" she asked, almost inaudibly.

"There are two courses," he said, in a slow, grave voice. "Either you must make your confession to Lord Norman, or leave it to me. I care not which it is.'

"He will kill you!" she panted.

He shrugged his shoulders with absolute indifference.

"Perhaps. I thought that you would prefer that he should hear the story from your lips. You know best which will be the less bitter course for you."

She looked at him with murder gleaming in her velvety eyes.

If she had had a weapon she would have struck him down then and there without pity or fear.

"I—I can not do it!" she wailed. "I can not do it!"

"There is no need!" said a voice at her side and starting, she turned and saw Lord Norman standing in the open window.

Lady Blanche glanced at his face, saw that he had heard all, and, flinging her hands before her eyes, crouched down as if he had struck her; but Oscar Raymond stood firm and folded his arms across his breast.

Lord Norman looked from one to the other.

His face was very pale and stern, but there was a light in his eyes, a reflection of relief and hope, which had been strangers to them for a long time.

Slowly he raised his hand and pointed to the staircase.

"You may go!" he said, quietly.

Oscar Raymond lifted his dark eyes calmly, almost solemnly.

"Is that all? I am ready to give you any satisfaction you may demand. We are in a foreign land, my lord—"

"You have given me all the satisfaction it is possible for you to render," said Bruce, in a low, steady voice. "I have no wish to kill you; I yield you your life and—remorse. Go!"

Oscar Raymond bent his head and moved away.

Lord Norman waited until his footsteps had died away, then he picked up the leathern case and dropped it at Lady Blanche's feet.

"Blanche," he said, in so low a tone of voice that she could scarcely hear him, "I have seen Floris; I have learned all that this man would have forced you to tell me. There is no need that you should speak a word. Get up now and go to your room. I shall go away from this place, this hotel, at once, and will leave a letter for your father, telling him that the—the engagement is broken off by—mutual consent. There need be nothing more said on either side. Heaven forgive you, Blanche, for this that you have done—forgive you as I—and she—forgive you!"

He laid his hand on her head for a moment, pityingly, forgivingly, and when, a moment afterward, she raised her heavy eyes, he was gone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BURDEN OF A SIGH.

Floris arose the next morning, after a sleepless night, during which she had laid awake possessed in one moment with a poignant grief and the next with a subdued joy.

She had lost him. He had gone from her forever, and he would marry Lady Blanche.

That was her grief, but he loved her still; he had not been false to her. That was her joy; and her joy in the knowledge of his truth and constancy far outweighed her grief at the loss of him.

And he was here in Florence.

She knew him well enough to know that he would not relinquish her without another attempt; she felt certain that she must place temptation beyond his reach.

She would leave Florence that morning, would put it out of his power to break his word to Lady Blanche.

Pale and sad, and yet with a trace of the great joy shining in her lovely eyes, she went to Mrs. Sinclair's room.

The old lady was in bed—she sat up too late over her precious books to be an early riser—and was made to understand that Floris wanted a holiday, and at once.

"Where are you going, my dear?" she said.

Floris was staggered for a moment.

"Into the hills. I shall only want a day or two," she explained.

He would not remain in Florence long, she thought.

"Oh, very well, my dear! You had better take one of the girls with you. And, by the way, you might gather some of the crested fern for me, you know; keep it as cool as you can, will you? And if you should happen to see any specimens of"—here followed a dozen long Latin names—"you might bring them also."

Floris promised that she would, and went upstairs and packed a bag with the few things she required; then she made a faint pretense at breakfast, and in an hour had started with a little maid, who was a favorite of hers.

The morning passed in a dreamy kind of way for Floris.

Slowly the carriage ascended the hills, the driver singing below his voice, the maid delighted with her holiday, chatting light-heartedly.

Presently, the maid stopped her prattle, and put her head on one side.

"There is some one on the road beside ourselves this morning, signorita. Perhaps they, too, are taking a holiday."

"Perhaps, Marie," said Floris quite dreamily.

The girl leaned forward and looked back.

It is a horseman, signorita, and he is riding fast. The poor horse is panting. It is not a holiday for him, poor, wretched beast!"

Floris nodded; she scarcely heard what the child was saying, but suddenly the coachman pulled up, and the next instant the horseman was beside the carriage, and Floris heard her name spoken.

She looked up and met her lover's eyes fixed on her, and her heart gave a great bound.

"Bruce!" she whispered, joyfully yet reproachfully. "Oh, Bruce, why have you done this?"

He leaned forward and laid his hand on the carriage door.

"I can not speak to you there. Will you come out? I must speak to you! Ah, why did you run away from me?"

"Because I knew—I felt—I was afraid you would come to see me, and—" she said faintly, in a troubled voice. "Oh, go back, Bruce!"

"I will—shortly," he said in a strange voice, with a strange light in his eyes. "Come into the road for a moment or two."

He got down and opened the door, and held her hand even after she had alighted, forgetting his horse.

"Signor, the horse!" shrieked the coachman, but it was too late, the sagacious animal, having had quite enough work for that day had swung around and was off in a good, round trot for Florence.

"Never mind," said Lord Bruce, with a short laugh; "it does not matter. Nothing matters now, Floris! Hush; not a word yet!"

He drew her arm within his, and led her under the trees, out of sight of the curious, wide-open eyes of the man and maid.

"And so you were running away from me, were you?" he said, holding her hands and looking into her eyes with the fire of excitement and happiness in his. "Running away from me—was that fair? Oh, my darling, how can I tell you—the words tremble on my lips! My heart is so full of joy and happiness—"

"Bruce!"

"Yes, so full that I can scarcely wait for the words that must be spoken. Floris, since I saw you last night all has been made clear. Look!"

He drew a card from his pocket and was about to show it to her, when he whipped it behind his back.

"Wait! Floris, you are sure it was I you saw that afternoon at Ballyfloe?"

Her head drooped.

"Oh, Bruce—why ask me? Why not let it be buried?"

"You are sure you would know my face again?" with a strange laugh. "See—is that the face of the man you saw at Lady Blanche's feet?"

And he held out the card.

She took it very slowly and looked at it.

It was a portrait of Oscar Raymond, which he had found among the papers packed in one of his portmanteaus.

A bewildered expression came into her eyes.

"Yes—it is! But, but"—she raised her eyes to his face—"is it not you, Bruce?"

"No," he said, gravely; "it is not. Look at the back; you will find the name written there, Floris. It is the portrait of a man who, for purposes of his own, passed himself off on you for me. Look at the name, please.."

She turned the card.

"Oscar Raymond to Lord Norman" was written on it.

For a moment her brain swam, and he put his arm around her and held her close to him, or she would have staggered.

"You see, darling!" he cried, "it is all clear now, is it not?"

And in swift, hurried words he told her the whole story.

"All this I heard last night from their own lips. One thing only is a mystery to me still, and that is the cause of the repentance—that is still an enigma, Floris."

"Shall I tell you, Bruce?" she whispered; then, with her hand upon his shoulder, she made the last portion of the mystery clear.

"My darling!" he murmured. "And it is you, you who have really saved us both, after all! If he had not seen you, we should still be—Oh, I can not think of it! Oh, my darling, my Floris, once again and forever! Let us thank

Heaven humbly and deeply for its mercy! A few days more and all would have been lost; there would have been a gulf between us which death only could have bridged—and now, death only can divide us!" and, with a cry of almost solemn joy, he strained her to his bosom.

With his arm around her waist they walked through the woods, her head resting on his shoulder, her eyes suffused with the tears which sprung from joy almost too intense for endurance.

It had come so suddenly, this flood of light after darkness that she felt bewildered and dazzled. Could it be true?"

In low, endearing tones he told her over and over again all that had happened, dwelling on the misery and helpless despair, and making all the points that had seemed so dark clear and intelligible; and every now and again he stopped and looked at her face, ay, and kissed it, as if he, too, felt there was something too marvelous in his good fortune for it to be quite real.

They forgot the coachman and little Marie; but those two individuals resigned themselves to the circumstances with admirable philosophy; the coachman drew his horse into the shade, and, lighting a cigar, flung himself, Italian-like, into the sun and went to sleep and Marie gathered some flowers and made a posie "for the signorita when she should come back."

And at last Flois remembered where she was.

"Bruce, dear, we must go on," she said, with a blush, and a glance at her watch. "I had—had quite forgotten everything! Have we been hours in this dear little wood or only minutes? We must go on to Pelago."

"Why Pelago?" he said, smoothing her hair. "Why not come back to Florence with me? You don't want a holiday now, seeing that you will have such a big one altogether directly! Besides, unless you take me back to Florence, how am I to get there? My horse bolted, you know!"

"I had forgotten that," she said, with another blush, and only too ready to accept the offered excuse. "Of course I must take you back!"

They went back to the carriage very sedately, but Marie, though young, was knowing.

"Oh, signorita," she whispered, as Floris, full of tenderness to all and everything in her new-born happiness, stooped and kissed her. "Is that signor your lover? Yes? Ah, but he is handsome and noble, is he not?"

It was a magic journey, that return to Florence, and though the two said but little their hands locked together, and their eyes, which met each other's ever and again, spoke volumes.

Mrs. Sinclair expressed no astonishment whatever at their return.

"I thought you would come back," she said, dryly; "and now I suppose I may finish my great book myself, Miss Wood, I mean, Miss Carlisle!"

"Oh, no!" said Floris, flushing; "I shall stay with you, madam."

But Mrs. Sinclair caught Lord Norman's eye and met his smile with a significant one of her own.

That evening he sent a telegram to Lady Betty.

It was very short, but it was emphatic enough, for in three days Lady Betty was at the Violet Villa.

Floris's astonishment at her appearance was only equaled by her delight.

"Now, I don't want to know anything more than Bruce has told me, my dear," she said, after she had a good cry and nearly exhausted herself by lavishing caresses on Floris. "In fact, he had forbidden me, at the risk of his sore displeasure, to talk about the past; but I've only one question to ask, and that is, Can you start for England to-morrow?"

"To-morrow!" said Floris, aghast.

"Yes, my dear; that is Bruce's wish."

"But you, dear Lady Betty?"

"Oh, I am of no consequence," said her ladyship, with a laugh. "Besides, really and truly, I am dying of anxiety to get you home, to have you to myself for a few days—I sha'n't have you long, I know, for Bruce is most intemperately anxious to appropriate you altogether. But do let us start to-morrow, if you can; I am sure no one will be gladder to see you than Sir Edward. My dear, if I wasn't one of the most sensible woman in England, I should have been most dreadfully jealous of you! Sir Edward thinks there is no one in the world so clever and bright and good-looking as 'Miss Carlisle,' and he has talked of you and regretted your absence every day. So let us go back to-morrow."

They started in the morning. Everything that wealth and influence could effect was done to surround the journey with luxury and ease.

If Floris Carlisle had been a princess of the blood royal, as Lady Betty said, there could not have been more fuss; and yet there was so little real fuss.

In his quiet way, Lord Norman secured sleeping-cars, engaged the best rooms, had carriages in waiting, and arranged everything almost as if by magic.

And so it happened that Floris, who a few months back had left England alone and friendless, returned to it like a Queen of Sheba!

Their welcome in Grosvenor Place was characteristic of Sir Edward.

"How do you do, Miss Carlisle?" he said, holding her hand and looking at her in his grave way, but with a kindly light in his keen, absorbed eyes. "I am very glad to see you back, and I have missed you very much indeed. Bruce is a lucky fellow to have recovered you, a very lucky fellow indeed," and he took and wrung Lord Norman's hand.

After dinner Sir Edward sat over his wine with Lord Norman for a little while, then he rose.

"Going to the House, I suppose?" said Lord Norman.

"N-o, not to-night, I think," answered Sir Edward.

"Not to-night! Why, I thought you had to speak?"

"Y-es, so I had; but I don't think I will go to-night—that is, if I sha'n't be in the way. I don't know what the papers will say; no doubt they'll imagine I've had a domestic bereavement.

It was a great compliment to Floris, and one she was fond of talking about in after-life, when Sir Edward had become the "great statesman of the day."

They spent a quiet, delightful evening, and when the two ladies had gone to their rooms, Lady Betty held Floris at arm's-length.

"Ah, my dear, how happy you look!" she said, her eyes full of sympathy very near to tears.

"Do I? I am glad of that," whispered Floris, "for I am very, very happy, dear. Happier, perhaps, for all that has passed. You see, one wants to know what misery is to be able to appreciate, at its full value, such happiness as mine!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FLORIS, COUNTESS OF NORMAN.

THE season was in full swing when these two lovers—so long separated, so strangely united—returned to London, and their advent made a pretty considerable stir.

The world at large knew nothing of what had happened, but rumor, with its usual readiness, invented a hundred and one stories, of all of which Floris was the heroine.

Consequently there was the greatest anxiety to see her, and Lady Betty was besieged with invitations, all pressing in the extreme.

"I think we had better go to the duchess's ball, and get it over, my dear," said Lady Betty. "Of course, you'll be mobbed and stared at; people are simply dying of curiosity to know the true story of your adventures. But you won't mind?"

"No, I sha'n't mind," said Floris, with her old *naiveté;* "not in the least, seeing that I don't mean to tell anyone."

"Very well," said Lady Betty; "then we'll go to-morrow night and gratify the world with a sight of the future Countess of Norman, whose adventures—"

"More or less fabulous," put in Floris.

—"Have filled the society papers."

It was a grand ball, and more crowded than it would have been if the duchess had not carefully circulated the news that Miss Carlisle and Lord Norman were actually coming.

For the first few minutes Floris was a little shy under the battery which was directed at her by so many curious eyes; but she grasped her lover's arm, just to reassure herself of his presence, and glanced up at his handsome face, with its old patrician impassiveness, and courage came back to her.

Before they had been in the room an hour the Lynches came in, and Floris needed no courage to meet these true friends.

Sir Joseph and his good-natured wife were overwhelmed with pleasure at seeing her, and scarcely left her side the whole evening.

A little after midnight Lord Norman went to the refreshment-room to get a drink, and had got his glass of champagne, when he saw a gentleman entering at the door opposite him.

He set the glass down and strode across the room, with a glad "Bertie!" on his lips.

Bertie Cliffordc, for it was he, started and turned around, and extended his hand; then, before Lord Norman could seize it, drew it back, and, with a cold, low bow, was about to pass out.

Lord Norman flushed, turned pale, and stood for a moment irresolute; then he followed him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Bertie!" he said.

"Well?" said Bertie; and his face paled sternly under its bronze. "I have no desire to hold any conversation with you, Lord Norman."

Lord Norman bit his lips.

"What does this mean, Bertie?" he said, gravely. "Ah, I see!"

Bertie flushed.

"My memory appears to be a better one than yours, Lord Norman," he said; "at any rate, it is too good for me to forget that a man who has acted as you have done to an innocent and trusting lady has lost the right to accost me or any honset man."

"Stop—for heaven's sake! Come with me," said Lord Norman, quickly, and seizing his arm he drew him into a retired spot. Bertie, have you not heard—have you seen none of the papers?"

"I have just returned to England," said Bertie, "and have seen no papers, nor heard any scandal whatsoever; that which I refer to—your conduct—happened before I left, Lord Norman. But I am glad I have met you thus soon, as it affords me an opportunity of demanding satisfaction on behalf of a lady whose name had not better be memtioned, but who honors me with her friendship."

"Satisfaction—yes!" said Lord Norman, gravely and quietly. "No, there is no need to mention her name."

He paused a moment, then went on, his voice quivering a little:

"Bertie—you see I still dare to call you so—Bertie, if anything could strengthen the friendship and respect I have for you, these words you have spoken, this greeting you have extended to me would do it! Yes, Bertie, I know what you mean—the lady you think I have wronged, to whom—Heaven forgive me—I did all unintentionally, is my—is Floris Carlisle—my future wife!"

Bertie stepped back, mute with astonishment.

"Hush, don't say a word," said Lord Norman, much agitated. "Wait until I have told you the whole story, Bertie."

The two men remained in the quiet corridor for half an hour.

At first, amazement was the predominant emotion in Bertie's heart, but this soon gave place to relief and thankfulness.

"Thank Heaven!" he said, at last. "Bruce, forgive me; and yet—"

"I scarcely deserve forgiveness; you are right. I believed, like a credulous fool. But don't think I have escaped punishment; I have had enough of that, Bertie, to satisfy even you. But come and see Floris. If there was anything wanting to complete her happiness your presence will supply it—we have talked of you so much, old fellow. How did you get home—not invalid—not wounded?" and he looked him over, anxiously.

"Invalid, but not wounded," said Bertie; "but I am all right now. I shall be able to dance at your wedding, Bruce," he said, with a faint flush. "Wait a moment, will you?" he added, as Lord Norman was for taking him to Floris. "This Oscar Raymond; you remember the man, of course? See here, Bruce, I don't want to startle you, but I have news of him."

"News of Oscar Raymond!" repeated Lord Norman, as if the name were difficult for him to pronounce calmly.

Bertie nodded gravely.

"Yes. I came by the overland route, you know; my doctor insisted upon my taking a round of it, anxious as I was to reach England. At Genoa we stayed at the 'Three Keys' Hotel—"

"Yes, yes, I know it."

"The night we stayed there a man was found dead in his room. He was an Englishman, there could be no doubt about that, but there was nothing to lead to his identification excepting a cigar-case with the initials 'O. R.'"

Lord Norman started and bit his lip.

"Did you see it—the case?"

"Yes."

"It was a Russian-leather case with the Christ Church arms on the back."

"Yes," assented Bertie. "You know it?"

"It was one I gave him when we were at college together," said Lord Norman, gravely. "You saw him?"

"Yes, for a moment. Now I know of this strange story, I remember enough of the face to trace a likeness; but this man's hair was iron gray—almost entirely gray, I am sure!"

"It is the same man. Great heavens! Dead so soon!"

"Yes, and died by his own hand. We found a bottle of chloral by the bedside; there was no doubt in the doctor's mind. We did all we could, and I stayed and saw him buried. What did you say, Bruce?" for Lord Norman had murmured something.

"Vengeance is mine!" he said, aloud and solemnly. "Don't tell me any more, Bertie; and—and—not a word to Floris. Come to her now."

But Bertie held back for a moment longer.

"I think I'll call in the morning, Bruce," he said, in a low voice, but at that moment her voice was heard behind them, and the next she had caught sight of him.

In an instant she broke from the arm of Sir Joseph, who accompanied her, and came toward Bertie, with outstretched hands and glowing eyes.

"At last!" she breathed, as he held her hands, both of them utterly indifferent to the people around them. "At last! Oh, how glad I am! How I have longed for you to come back! How glad, how glad I am! Where did you find him, Bruce? It only wanted this—"

"What did I tell you, Bertie?" said Lord Norman, with quiet triumph.

Bertie said nothing, not a word, but probably, like the parrot, he thought the more.

Certain it is that from that moment he became, indeed, a brother to the beautiful woman, and that, though he never married and was a constant visitor—more constant by a very great deal than brothers are—Bruce never felt the slightest twinge of jealousy.

It was a very quiet wedding, at least that was how Lady Betty described it, though, as Floris said, if hers was a quiet one she pitied the bride who had to endure a grand one.

The date of the wedding had got about, perhaps Lady Betty whispered it in the strictest confidence to a lady friend or two, and the little chapel in the Savoy was crammed.

All Floris's friends were there, the Lynches and Doctor Greene included; and the great duke who was related to Bruce, at his own request, gave the bride away.

Bertie was best man, and not a few of the young ladies who were present cast pensive glances in his direction; but Bertie seemed to think on this, as on all other occasions, that there was only one woman in the world worth thinking of, and as he could not have her, the rest, as Hamlet says, "was silence."

The wedding-breakfast was a great success, principally, I think, because there were few speeches, and those short ones; and among the presents spread out on the drawing-room tables, amid the articles of gold and silver and the splendid jewels, was a bunch of rare orchids from Florence, with Mrs. Sinclar's best wishes.

Floris looked very beautiful; indeed, the great society paper declared emphatically that she would be the most lovely bride of the season; and Bruce, who had lost his haggard look, was, as Doctor Greene remarked, "as fit as a man could be."

They had decided to spend the honey-moon at Norman Holme; they both had had enough of the Continent for the present, and soon after the breakfast they started, the guests thronging the entrance hall with the usual rice and slippers, most of the latter, it is scarcely necessary to state, striking the coachman and the footman.

One honey-moon is generally very much like another, but Floris and Bruce's was an exception to the rule.

They had so nearly lost each other that their reunion had seemed almost miraculous, and Bruce would sit and look at her sometimes, in the quiet of the after-dinner hour and ask himself what he had done to deserve this great joy which had fallen to him.

After three weeks of this perfect happiness they went to London, but the honey-moon was not over, and they went without fuss or notice to their friends.

"Let us enjoy ourselves together for a week or two at least," said Bruce. "We won't go to the London house, but put up at Claridge's, and we'll just take a holiday as Susan the house-maid and James the footman do when they are mated. We'll go to the theatres and do the galleries and concerts, and I'll row you to Toplow-on-the-Thames on especially fine days, and you shall be quite a Bohemian."

And they carried out their little plan to perfection.

The ceremony and hard work pertaining to her as the Countess of Norman were put off for awhile, and they devoted themselves to each other like "Susan and James."

One night, as they were returning from one of the theatres, their little brougham broke down near Leicester Square.

It was nothing very serious, and no one was hurt, not even the horse.

Bruce got Floris out in a moment, and was calling a cab, when Floris, who had got on a bonnet and thick, plain wrap, said:

"It is a lovely night, Bruce. Can't we walk?"

"All right," he said. "You are sure you are wrapped up?"

"Perfectly; and the walk will be so nice. I've never walked in London so late as this. How strange it looks."

He took her on his arm, lighted a cigar, and they walked toward home.

To avoid crowded thoroughfares, Lord Norman turned down a quiet street, and they were just passing a French café, the lights from the windows of which quite lighted up the streets, when the door was violently thrown open and a woman came hurrying out.

She was weeping bitterly, but in a dull, heavy fashion, as if she were accustomed to it; and Floris seeing her, pressed Lord Norman's arm and whispered:

"Oh Bruce, that poor woman; see!"

He turned his head, and at the moment a man, evidently intoxicated, came out of the *café*, looked round in search of the woman, and with a tipsy oath, aimed a blow at her.

Lord Norman was just in time to seize his shaky arm and push him back against the wall.

The man stared at him for a moment, then, mumbling incoherently, shuffled and staggered back into the house.

Floris, whose pity was always, as Bruce said, ready for man or beast, went to the woman and touched her on the arm.

"Poor creature!" she murmured.

The woman dropped her apron from her eyes, and Floris started back.

It was Josine!

Josine, a pale, careworn, harassed-looking woman, with sunken eyes and tear-swollen lips; there was a dark-red stain on one side of her face showing that the brute had already struck her before she had left the house.

Floris shrunk back into the shadow, and Bruce came up to her.

"Are you hurt?" he said, quietly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Josine shook her head dully and despairingly.

"No, sir; he is my husband. Look at my face!" she raised her head to the light; "look at me! He who did that was the man I raised from beggary—my husband! He has spent all my money, and—"

She stopped and shrunk back with a cry of fear and dread, for the light had fallen upon Bruce's face, and she recognized him.

"Milord Norman!" she gasped. "Oh, mercy, my lord, mercy!" and she seemed about to fall on her knees; but Floris caught her arm and held her on her feet, murmuring words of forgiveness and pity.

She would have stopped with her, goodness knows how long, and would have taken her away, but Bruce drew her to him with gentle firmness.

"Come, now, Floris; you can do nothing to-night. I will come and see you to-morrow, Josine. You have behaved very wickedly, but you have received your punishment, my poor girl."

"Yes, yes, milord," sobbed Josine, gesticulating wildly. "It was all the money. If I had not had Lady Blanche's money, this man would not have married me, and I should have been spared this," and she pointed to the scarlet stain on her white face. "Ah, we were very clever, milord, but it is Miladi Floris who has won the game after all, while we—" and with a shrug of her shoulders and a dull sob she went into the house.

On a night in June, when the season was at its height, was held one of the great state balls.

The room was very crowded, and dancing was rendered almost impossible.

For the most part the brilliant throng gathered in groups and chattered, while they listened to the music or watched the dancers who had found sufficient courage to take the floor.

The centre of one of these groups was Floris, Countess of Norman.

She had never looked more lovely than she looked to-night, and it was no wonder that with her beauty and the vague air of romance that had come about her, London should be metaphorically at her feet.

Close by her side, as usual, was Bertie, and not very far off young Lord Harry, whose devotion to Bruce was almost dog-like in its intensity.

Bruce had attempted a waltz with some one, but had found the attempt a failure, and was sitting it out with his partner in a cool nook near the door.

Presently his partner was taken away from him by the man to whom she was next engaged, and Bruce was making his way to his wife's side, when he came full tilt upon Lady Blanche.

She was so much altered that for the moment he was staggered! but the next, as he met the calm, serene gaze of the brown, velvety eyes, his heart swelled with a righteous anger.

She held out her hand with a cold, icy smile, though her heart may have been beating wildly notwithstanding.

Lord Norman touched her hand with his fingers, and stood regarding her.

"How do you do, Bruce?" she said. "I did not know you were in town. We have just come back. Is"—she paused a second—"is Lady Norman quite well?"

He bowed.

"Yes, we have just come back. I suppose I ought to tell you that I am engaged to be married to the Count d'Encion."

Bruce knew him; an old man, and a bad one.

"To the Count d'Encion?" he said, speaking for the first time, his eyes stern and cold. "Then I may conclude that you will spend a greater portion of your time in Paris?"

"Yes, certainly," she said. "Why?'

"Because, as Lady Norman would decline any invitations to houses which you intended visiting, it would be as well to know when you were in town."

Lady Blanche rose—she had sunk on to a chair—and looked at him; she was deathly white and breathing hard.

"You—you do not forgive or forget, it seems, Bruce."

"I forgive, we both forgive, and we are anxious to forget that is why I do not intend my wife to meet you, Blanche," he said, calmly.

She opened her fan, shut it with a sudden click, and turned from him.

A few minutes afterward he heard "Lady Seymour's carriage" called for.

He could forgive Oscar Raymond, dead by his own hand; he could forgive Josine, with her drunken husband as a punishment; but he could not forgive, entirely and completely, Lady Blanche!

THE END

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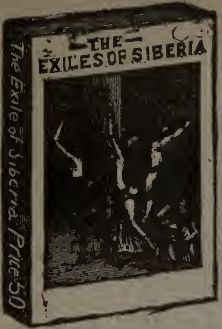
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